

Companies as Critics, Adapters, and Pioneers: Motives, Strategies, and Risks of Corporate Social Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

Companies are increasingly expected to take a stance on controversial social and political issues. Known as corporate social advocacy (CSA), companies are addressing challenges such as the election of populist parties, immigration policies, and gun laws. To explore the motives, strategies, and stakeholder influences behind CSA, we conducted semi-structured interviews with communications managers at large corporations ($N = 15$). Results indicate that both intrinsic (employee pressure and corporate values) and extrinsic (external stakeholder pressure and economic benefits) motives drive companies to engage in CSA. Companies manage CSA cautiously, using three strategic approaches: (1) careful issue selection, (2) balancing proactive and reactive positioning to manage narratives and public sentiment, and (3) choosing between clear, explicit statements on straightforward issues and vague, ambiguous statements on highly polarized issues. The risks are primarily economic (e.g. reputational damage and stakeholder alienation). Based on these strategies, we categorize companies into three types: (1) critics, who rarely take positions and act reactively; (2) adapters, who decide on a case-by-case basis and take a proactive stance on clear violations of values, but are wary of polarizing rhetoric; and (3) pioneers, who proactively address controversial issues and make their positions clear.

Companies play a critical role in addressing societal challenges (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Accordingly, they are expected to take responsibility in environmental, economic, and social contexts (Colleoni, 2013; Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). Consequently, many companies engage in initiatives related to sustainability, environmental protection, and equality, and communicate these commitments to enhance their reputation and legitimacy (Dawkins, 2004; Lock & Schulz-Knappe, 2019; Viererbl & Koch, 2022). These activities fall under the broader umbrella of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In recent years, there has been a growing demand for companies to also address controversial socio-political issues (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022). These issues include topics such as populist election outcomes, immigration policies, gun laws, and speed limits (e.g., Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Hydock et al., 2019).

Following Nalick et al. (2016), we define controversial socio-political issues as pressing, unresolved societal challenges that divide public opinion and have the potential to lead to polarized public discourse. Corporate statements on these issues have been described using

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various terms, such as corporate social advocacy or corporate social activity (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021). Despite variations in terminology, these concepts generally involve companies taking stances on controversial issues, sometimes accompanied by specific actions. Such positions can be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, stakeholders – particularly journalists and activists – press companies to address social challenges (Fyke et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Employees and consumers may also push companies to engage in debates on issues like mandatory vaccinations or gender equality quotas (Müller, 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). On the other hand, taking a stand can be risky: If stakeholders do not share the publicly expressed positions, backfire effects can occur (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Koch & Viererbl, 2022). This can result in negative consequences such as diminished credibility, reduced positive attitudes towards the company, and potential boycotts (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; J. K. Kim et al., 2020).

Companies therefore face a dilemma: Should they publicly address controversial socio-political issues despite the risks, avoid these debates altogether, or find a balanced approach (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021)? While previous research has primarily focused on stakeholder perspectives (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; Sauter & Jungblut, 2024) or the content of corporate positions (e.g., Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Gaines-Ross, 2017), the corporate perspective has been largely overlooked. This study contributes to research on corporate positions regarding socio-political issues by exploring how companies decide whether and how to engage publicly. It also provides empirical evidence on the factors driving these decisions and the extent of corporate participation across various socio-political issues.

Socio-political issues

Companies are facing a shift in fundamental social and business values. For stakeholders, the sole pursuit of profit is no longer the *raison d'être* for companies. Especially for younger generations, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the creation of social value have gained significant importance (Shivakanth Shetty et al., 2019). Companies are now more frequently taking stances in socio-political debates, a response to the growing necessity in a more politicized environment. Society as a whole and socially negotiated issues are increasingly characterized by polarization and fragmentation (Van Aelst et al., 2017; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). The numerous socio-political issues on which public opinion is highly polarized can trigger intense (emotional) debates and lead to a division among stakeholders, as there is no normative social consensus (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Dealing with their politicized environment and thus with polarized issues is therefore a major challenge for companies and their communications, as there is a risk of alienating certain stakeholders when companies speak out on controversial issues (Nalick et al., 2016, Rim et al., 2020). In addition, the increasing political fragmentation of society poses a dilemma for companies when faced with the competing interests of different stakeholders (Sunstein, 2009; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021).

Despite the critical role of strategic communication in managing these dynamics, research has not yet adequately addressed how companies' social roles intersect with these developments (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). While existing studies on socio-political issues have often concentrated on business interests (e.g., Hillman et al., 2004) or overarching motives (e.g., Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), there is a gap in understanding why

companies face pressure to take stances on socio-political issues that lack normative social consensus.

Van der Meer and Jonkman (2021) argue that one reason companies engage in controversial debates is to maintain their legitimacy within society, often referred to as their “social license to operate” (SLO) (Hall & Jeanneret, 2015). Companies can sustain their SLO by meeting social and moral expectations that exceed governmental and legal requirements – a significant challenge in today’s environment. In a polarized landscape, companies must continually justify their legitimacy and adapt to an ever-evolving social context by participating in contentious debates (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). With increasing mediatization, companies and their communications departments cannot focus solely on building a positive reputation. Instead, they must actively renegotiate their SLO regarding specific socio-political issues to maintain and enhance their legitimacy (Hurst et al., 2020; Patriotta et al., 2011).

To better understand their role in these public discussions, theories of the public sphere can be particularly insightful. Specifically, the concept of the public sphere as an intermediary communication system (Ferree et al., 2002) is useful. This perspective views the public sphere as a network that bridges politics, citizens, and various social subsystems. It comprises multiple communication forums where issues are debated. In strategic communication, these forums are often referred to as “issue arenas” (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Vos et al., 2014). Companies participate in these arenas not just in relation to their core business but as actors engaged in broader socio-political discussions (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021).

Corporate social advocacy

The literature on corporate socio-political positioning employs various terms and definitions, which often differ by discipline (e.g., economics, political science, communication studies) and focus (e.g., activism versus advocacy). Advocacy involves persuading or arguing in support of a particular cause, policy, idea, or value system (Cox & Pezzullo, 2016), whereas activism refers to taking direct and visible actions to achieve political or social outcomes. For instance, expressing empathy for war victims might be classified as advocacy, while actively participating in efforts to aid them would be considered activism. Despite these distinctions, the terms are frequently used interchangeably, and in practice, advocacy and activism often overlap. For example, CEO activism may involve a public statement by a CEO on a controversial issue (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019) but does not necessarily entail concrete actions.

A distinction is also made between social and political aspects. For example, corporate political advocacy is the political representation of corporate interests as an explicit and public statement or support of particular individuals, groups, or ideals and values (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Corporate social advocacy can be defined as public statements by organizations on controversial socio-political issues (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022) and often also refers to what is understood by corporate political advocacy (Rim et al., 2020; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). We therefore use the term corporate social advocacy (CSA), which refers to corporate statements and positions on specific (controversial) socio-political issues.

In the context of this work, we define CSA as a public communication measure by which a company or a public representative of the company takes a position on a controversial socio-political issue (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). This shows that it also matters who communicates the position. The company itself can take a position, but so can a (high-ranking) representative of the company, such as the CEO, the chairperson of the supervisory board, or a press spokesperson. The choice of communicator can influence the perception of the message (Denner et al., 2019). Positioning is a response to a social event that was not initiated by the company itself or its official representatives and that affects the company only indirectly (if at all) (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021); it can be both planned and spontaneous. For example, CEO tweets on a particular topic can be planned in advance, or they can be a spontaneous response to an event (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Rim et al., 2020).

This example demonstrates that CSA does not always qualify as strategic communication. While CSA can be strategic in many instances, its categorization depends on how the communication is executed. Strategic communication refers to all communication essential for the survival and sustained success of an entity; it is the purposeful use of communication to engage in conversations that are strategically significant to an organization's goals (Zerfass et al., 2018). As such, it is goal-oriented communication that aligns with the organization's objectives (Zerfass et al., 2018). CSA can be considered part of an organization's strategic communication when it is carefully planned, with clear goals and tactics designed to influence stakeholders or achieve specific outcomes. However, CSA can also occur in ways that are not strategic. For instance, if a company or CEO makes an impromptu, unplanned public statement on a socio-political issue without clear goals or a defined strategy, it should not be classified as strategic communication, even if motivated by the desire to reflect certain values or ethics.

In contrast to CSR activities, CSA activities are usually purely communicative and may be accompanied by corporate actions and decisions (e.g., the implementation of a women's quota on supervisory boards), but may also stand alone (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021). The topics and content of the messages communicated are not directly related to the company's core business (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021), although there may be a perceived fit between the topic and the respective brand (Lim & Young, 2021). The issues on which positions are taken are characterized by controversy (Austin et al., 2019; Dodd & Supa, 2014) and partisanship (Bhagwat et al., 2020; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021).

In contrast to public affairs, which is understood as the communicative legitimization of organizations vis-à-vis the political system, CSA is not (primarily) directed at the political system. This is because public affairs is aimed at the strategic management of political decision-making processes and addresses political decision-makers (e.g., MPs and their staff, other politicians, authorities, government officials), for example through lobbying, whereas CSA is explicitly aimed at the public or sub-publics (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Hillman et al., 2004; Rim et al., 2020). However, this does not rule out the possibility that the two fields may also merge, especially in public campaigns or grassroots lobbying, where positioning can also be used to reach the public or sub-publics, but this is explicitly only an intermediate step to influencing political decision-makers.

To date, there is little empirical evidence on the extent to which companies take positions on socio-political issues in their communications and the reasons why they do or do not take a position. Most studies are conceptual and/or theoretical in nature (e.g., Eilert &

Nappier Cherup, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). In addition, many studies dealing with CSA focus on the CEOs of companies and less often on the brand or the company as a whole (Bojanic, 2023; Rumstadt & Kanbach, 2022). Furthermore, they often only look at one issue or one company (e.g., Gaither et al., 2018; Rim et al., 2020; Zhao & Valentini, 2022). The present study contributes to this emerging research field by providing comprehensive empirical evidence on the drivers behind companies' decisions to engage in CSA and the extent of their participation across multiple issues. This broader perspective enhances the understanding of CSA dynamics at the organizational level and offers practical insights for corporate decision-makers navigating socio-political engagement.

Aim of the study

The first objective of this study is to delve into the underlying motives that drive companies to take positions on socio-political issues. Companies participate in issue arenas where controversial socio-political issues are discussed in order to maintain their social license to operate (SLO) (Hall & Jeanneret, 2015; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Therefore, organizations may take a position on socio-political issues for external reasons. Following the literature on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), this can be considered as extrinsic motives (Du et al., 2010; S. Kim & Choi, 2018; Romani et al., 2016). Extrinsic motives are primarily economic, where organizations seek to increase profitability through their communication efforts (Du et al., 2010; Romani et al., 2016). The rationale behind this approach is the belief that fostering a positive corporate image or reputation can positively influence stakeholder behavior. Intrinsic motives, on the other hand, stem from ethical and moral beliefs that are inherent to the organization (Du et al., 2010; S. Kim & Choi, 2018). Companies driven by intrinsic motives are motivated by a sense of responsibility to make a positive contribution to societal issues, regardless of direct economic benefits. These motives reflect a commitment to ethical principles and values that guide decision making beyond profit maximization. We therefore are interested in the motives of companies when deciding whether to take a stance: What are the underlying motives that drive companies to take a stand on socio-political issues (RQ1)?

Moreover, we aim to investigate the strategic approaches companies adopt in positioning themselves on socio-political issues. Over the years, scholars have debated the clarity of strategic communication's definition, acknowledging that while the concept is attractive, it remains somewhat fuzzy and in need of further refinement to clarify its boundaries (Nothhaft et al., 2018). To address this, a more focused and comprehensive definition of strategic communication has emerged, stating that strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an organization (Zerfass et al., 2018). The strategic process in organizations involves three distinct but interconnected phases: (1) strategy formulation and revision, (2) strategy presentation, and (3) strategy execution, implementation, and operationalization (Zerfass et al., 2018). Strategy formulation and revision involves both resource allocation and a communicative process that shapes the meaning of actions. Strategy presentation refers to the process of informing relevant actors about the strategy, its objectives, and the resources or opportunities it provides for successful implementation. Strategy execution, implementation, and operationalization involve allocating resources to operational tasks or tactical actions, and

while it is often not directly observable, it manifests in the form of operational routines, tactical engagements, or established patterns within the organization (Zerfass et al., 2018).

These phases are also applicable to strategic CSA. First, we seek to understand whether companies employ specific strategies to select certain issues for public stance while abstaining from others, and to what extent this process is proactive or reactive. Second, we are interested in the nature of these strategic positions – whether companies articulate clear and definitive stances on issues, or whether they prefer to emphasize the broader importance of an issue without taking a definitive stance. We also examine the degree of specificity and concreteness in their public positions. Furthermore, we investigate whether firms exploit strategic ambiguity by using vague or ambiguous language, as observed in previous studies (Eisenberg, 1984; Scandeliuss & Cohen, 2016; Wexler, 2009). Therefore, our research question is: What strategies do companies employ when they decide to take a stance on socio-political issues (RQ2)?

A company's CSA has significant implications for how it is perceived by stakeholders and how these stakeholders engage with the company. Studies indicate that taking a clear stance on socio-political issues can result in positive outcomes, such as improving the company's reputation, boosting employee morale, and attracting socially conscious consumers (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022). However, the decision to take a stance or remain neutral also carries notable risks (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Matos et al., 2017). Companies may face backlash from stakeholders with opposing views, increased regulatory scrutiny, or the alienation of key customer segments. Companies often prioritize risk management over potential gain, as missteps in CSA can result in long-term reputational damage or financial losses that outweigh any potential benefits. Given this reality, understanding how companies manage and mitigate these risks is more strategically relevant than focusing on the less predictable opportunities. Furthermore, risks underscore the delicate balance between corporate strategy, societal expectations, and reputational risk management in CSA. Therefore, understanding the risks associated with CSA is essential for analyzing how companies strategically navigate these challenges. We thus pose the following question: What risks do companies face when taking a stand on socio-political issues (RQ3)?

Method

Participants

To address our research questions, we conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with communication managers from large German business-to-consumer (B2C) companies. We strategically selected cases based on several criteria.

First, we identified the largest companies by revenue in Germany using the F.A.Z. Institute's list (Fehr & Guckler, 2022). High-revenue companies are assumed to face greater stakeholder demands and pressure to take a stance on socio-political issues. These companies are also likely to have the resources necessary to establish strategic processes for socio-political engagement. The F.A.Z. list includes the top 200 companies by turnover across industry, trade, and services, as well as the 25 largest banks and the 25 largest insurance firms resulting in 250 companies of interest.

Second, we focused on companies that are at least partially active in the business-to-consumer sector, as these organizations tend to have greater public visibility and are

Table 1. Job titles of the interviewees and companies' industry.

Job Title	Industry
Head of Public Relations and Affairs	Food
Head of Corporate Communications	Energy
Senior Manager Media Relations & Social Media	Consumer Goods, Manufacturing
Head of Corporate Communications	Food, Logistics
Vice President Corporate Citizenship	Energy
Head of Public Relations/Spokesperson	Trade, Hardware & Garden Stores
Division Manager Communications & Marketing	Banking
Head of Strategy & Planning/External Communication	Telecommunications
Division Manager Product Management	Retail
Spokesperson	Insurance
Head of Strategic Affairs/Corporate Communication	Media, Services, Education
Head of Services/Newsroom Coordinator	Insurance
Group Vice President Corporate Communications & Political Affairs	Retail
Integrated Communications Lead	Tech, IT
Group Spokesperson	Electronics, Manufacturing

subjected to more intense positioning pressures (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Of the 250 companies listed, 89 met the B2C criterion and were contacted. Contact details were obtained from company websites, and whenever possible, communication managers were selected for their decision-making authority and ability to provide detailed insights into internal processes. Initial contact was made via email.

Third, we completed the sample step by step to achieve saturation, meaning that no additional data is found that provides new information (Sandelowski, 2008; Saunders et al., 2018) and to ensure that selected cases are particularly rich in information. The process to achieve saturation was guided by selecting typical cases on the one hand and ensuring maximum structural variation on the other, meaning collecting data from individuals who represent atypical positions. Recruitment continued until interviews no longer yielded new findings (Grady, 1998; Saunders et al., 2018). In total, we conducted 15 individual interviews. After reaching saturation, no further follow-up emails were sent, and no new participants were recruited.

The final sample consisted of 13 male and two female respondents, with an average age of 49 (ranging from 39 to 64 years). On average, respondents had 22 years of experience in communications and had been with their current company for 13 years, holding their current positions for an average of nine years. The participating companies, as listed by Fehr and Guckler (2022), employed between 2,900 and 303,000 people, with 2021 fiscal year revenues ranging from €4.1 billion to €77.4 billion. Detailed job titles and company sectors are provided in Table 1.

Study design

Interviews were conducted between March and May 2023. Prior to each interview, participants received an information sheet explaining the study's purpose and signed a consent form authorizing the collection and use of their personal data. A trained research assistant conducted the interviews, offering participants the choice of video or personal communication. Fourteen participants opted for video calls ($n = 14$), while one chose a personal communication ($n = 1$). All interviews were recorded using a smartphone and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Before recording began, participants reaffirmed their consent for the

use of their audio recordings in the study. Participants also completed a brief survey to provide socio-demographic information, which is available on OSF (<https://tinyurl.com/8ypfb88b>). On average, interviews lasted 43 minutes.

Immediately after each interview, a postscript was created to document key aspects of the interview situation. This included information about the time, duration, and format of the interview, as well as details about the mood, notable incidents, and significant points in pre- and post-interview conversations. The interviewer's assessment of both their own behavior and that of the interviewee was also recorded, along with any anomalies or noteworthy information. Initial rough ideas for interpretation were noted when applicable. These short written sketches served as a guide for the sampling process, helping to identify included cases and highlight potential gaps (Misoch, 2019). For anonymity, interviewees' names are pseudonymized in the following discussion (e.g., "Interviewee 2").

Interview guideline and procedure

The interview guideline used in this study was structured into four main blocks: (1) Values and Responsibility, (2) Socio-political Issues & Positioning, (3) Limits, Opportunities & Risks, and (4) Conclusion. Each block included narrative prompts or key questions guiding the discussion within that thematic area. Before commencing with the first block, following a brief introduction, participants were assured that their responses would not be evaluated, encouraging them to express their thoughts openly. Details regarding the interview's duration, recording procedures, and data anonymization were also provided, ensuring participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their contributions.

The goal of the first block was to facilitate participants' engagement by starting with an open-ended question: "Could you please start by explaining which values are particularly important to your company?" This approach aimed to elicit narratives from participants, alleviating any initial hesitation or discomfort associated with the interview process (Misoch, 2019). The second key question in block 1, "What role does the topic of responsibility play in your company?" aimed to explore how responsibility is perceived, to whom it extends, and its practical implications within the company's operations.

The second block focused specifically on the study's central theme. Participants were asked about the general importance of socio-political issues to their company and whether the company had publicly addressed such issues. If affirmative, specific questions followed regarding the rationale behind these positions, communication channels used, communication tone, and any accompanying actions. In cases where no public stance had been taken, reasons for this decision were explored. Participants were also prompted to discuss potential future socio-political positions, perceived external pressures influencing these decisions, and which socio-political issues were deemed significant.

The third block delved into the boundaries, opportunities, and risks associated with CSA. Participants were asked to identify issues their company would unequivocally avoid taking a stance on and reasons for this stance. Additionally, discussions centered on whether the company would address highly divisive issues among its target audience. Finally, participants were invited to share their perspectives on the opportunities and risks associated with their company's social advocacy.

The fourth block served as the concluding phase, inviting participants to add any final comments or thoughts that had not been covered in the interview. This segment aimed to

capture additional insights or perspectives that participants deemed relevant but had not been prompted by previous questions. The interview guidelines can be found on OSF (<https://osf.io/amnk4/>).

Qualitative content analysis

The interview transcripts underwent qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA software for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. Qualitative content analysis provides a systematic and methodologically controlled approach to analyzing texts. Specifically, we applied content-structuring qualitative content analysis, focusing on the formation of categories and subcategories to organize the data.

The analytical approach combined deductive and inductive category-building methods. After transcription, the data were thoroughly reviewed, and key passages, such as notable quotes, were highlighted in color to gain an initial understanding of the interviews. Deductive categories were then derived from the existing literature, research questions, and interview guide. Texts were analyzed line-by-line, with relevant passages assigned to these deductive categories during the initial coding phase. The deductive categories were subsequently analyzed and further subcategorized when necessary. Relevant passages from the coded material were recorded into the newly developed subcategories. This process represented a deductive-inductive category formation: initial categories were formed deductively, followed by inductive category formation based on the empirical data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

All deductive and inductive categories are documented in a category system, which is central to qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). The system includes a description of each category's content, guidelines for its application, and example quotes. Additionally, the category system specifies the research question each category addresses and whether it was derived deductively or inductively. The complete category system is available on OSF (<https://osf.io/amnk4/>).

Results

Before delving into our research questions, we first describe the issues on which companies take a stand. The majority of companies are actively engaged in taking positions on socio-political issues. Similar to Fröhlich and Knobloch (2021), our study identifies three distinct issue groups that have prompted companies to take positions: social developments, recurring events, and singular key events. *Social developments* encompass ongoing societal changes that influence public discourse over extended periods. This includes issues such as human rights, with a focus on gender equality, cultural diversity and inclusion. In addition, sustainability issues such as climate change and climate protection are integral parts of corporate agendas. It is worth noting that the issues subsumed under societal developments may not be universally controversial, simply because of the relative consensual nature of the issues themselves and because of the breadth of corporate engagement in these areas. *Recurring events* are another category prompting CSA. These events include observances such as Pride Month, which companies often acknowledge through public statements or initiatives. Elections and G7 meetings also fall into this category, leading companies to align their positions with prevailing political and social narratives at such

critical junctures. *Key events* are the third group of topics that companies communicate about. Key events can be characterized as significant occurrences that trigger immediate responses from companies. For example, the conflict in Ukraine prompted companies to address issues such as economic sanctions, humanitarian aid, and operational strategies in the region, reflecting their role in international relations and corporate responsibility amid heightened global scrutiny. In addition, terrorist attacks and other major geopolitical incidents can also prompt companies to take positions on security, humanitarian, and geopolitical issues.

Motives behind CSA

RQ1 explores the underlying motives that drive companies to take a stance on socio-political issues. The study confirms that both *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motives influence decisions on whether and how companies engage in CSA. Intrinsic motives play a crucial role in prompting companies to adopt socio-political positions and can be categorized into two types: *impact of internal stakeholders* and *corporate values*. Internal stakeholders have a significant impact on the decisions regarding engagement in CSA by demanding that companies take positions on certain topics they deem important. Several interviewees describe how ordinary employees often demand that a position be taken, creating a dynamic employee pressure that can force companies to engage in socio-political debates. Employees often approach the CEO directly and urge the company to take a stand. The larger the company, the more perspectives to consider and the more voices to hear. Respondents argue that large, global companies are a reflection of society and therefore need to reflect societal interests in their external communication. However, it is not only employees who have an impact. Management, shareholders, or even the founding family in the case of family-owned companies may demand that the company take a stand. These internal pressures reflect a broader expectation that companies align their public positions with the values of their internal stakeholders.

Corporate values, identity, and corporate culture are also pivotal in guiding CSA decisions. Companies often feel compelled to take a stance that aligns with their ethos, as these values are integral to their corporate identity. One interviewee, discussing the company's stance on the Russian-Ukrainian War, stated: "Because this is so badly against our values... what happened there, that we took a very clear position and did not hide" (Interviewee 14). Management and communications teams may decide that it is critical to position the company in certain discourses to authentically reflect its core values. These values and identity are formed over years, even decades, and become part of the company's DNA. As many interviewees noted, intrinsic beliefs guide their actions without the need for external pressure. Companies take a stand because it is part of their identity. For example, Interviewee 15 emphasized that even in regions where diversity is not a priority and local views differ significantly, the company maintains its stance on diversity because it is in line with its official corporate policy: "We operate in parts of the world where diversity is not a priority, and people see it differently than we do at [corporate headquarters]. But we do it anyway because it is our official policy."

In terms of extrinsic motives, there are also two types: *external stakeholder pressure* and *public perception*. Companies encounter mounting pressure from various external stakeholders, including customers, journalists, activist groups, NGOs, suppliers, politicians, job

applicants, and investors. Nearly half of the interviewees emphasized the growing external expectation for companies to take stands on socio-political issues. Social media amplifies these expectations, providing a platform for stakeholders to voice their opinions. Additionally, pressure arises when competitors position themselves: “If all companies position themselves on a topic and you do not have a position, that doesn’t look particularly good; then you have to justify it: Why aren’t you saying anything about it?” (Interviewee 1). These expectations are often anticipated rather than explicitly articulated.

Furthermore, public perception and economic factors also play a significant role. Taking a position can increase customer awareness of a company as well as its products and services. However, Interviewee 8 notes that CSA must be outstanding to attract significant attention: “If you want to stand out and be bold, you need to dare to engage in controversial topics beyond the superficial statements about diversity and environmental protection.” Beyond attracting attention, the primary goal is to potentially build a positive reputation. As Interviewee 3 states, “There is a great opportunity to show what the company stands for, what values guide us as a company, what is important to us, and ultimately to build or strengthen our reputation among various stakeholders.” Closely linked to the positive effect on image is the impact on employee recruitment, as younger generations place high value on a company’s socio-political positions. This affects whether a company is perceived as an attractive employer, enhancing its ability to attract potential employees. However, interviewees also acknowledge the problematic nature of extrinsic motives for CSA. As stated by Interviewee 3, while CSA can yield extrinsic benefits, “it should not be pursued purely for PR purposes. Instead, it should align with internal practices and values to be successful and authentic.”

Strategies of CSA

RQ2 examines the strategies companies use when deciding to take a position on socio-political issues. We examine three dimensions of these strategies: *issue selection*, the *degree of proactivity versus reactivity*, as well as the *clarity and explicitness* of their positions. First, regarding issue selection, its relevance to the company is a critical consideration. Nearly all respondents emphasized that they refrain from taking a stance on debates where their company lacks direct involvement or relevance. This approach aims to avoid perceptions of implausibility, as articulated by one participant: “You have to have a connection to an issue in some way; otherwise, it is implausible and seen as flimsy and hypocritical” (Interviewee 1). For instance, some interviewees expressed hesitancy to comment on topics like the World Cup in Qatar or energy subsidies in Alaska, citing a lack of expertise and relevance to their core business.

Moreover, interviewees highlighted a cautious approach towards “trendy topics” in CSA. Rather than aligning with every popular issue, respondents emphasized the importance of staying true to internal corporate values to maintain credibility. Failing to do so risks accusations of “greenwashing” as noted by Interviewee 3. Additionally, Interviewee 13 raised concerns about other forms of washing accusations, criticizing superficial corporate engagement on issues like gender equality without substantive internal practices to support such positions. Lastly, many interviewees indicated a reluctance to publicly engage in specific daily or partisan political matters. Criticizing or supporting political parties or their agendas was seen as divisive and potentially alienating to large segments of the

population. Participants stressed that political debates are better left to politicians, with some companies engaging in political discussions primarily through non-public means like lobbying.

Second, in terms of proactivity and reactivity, the study shows that companies are adopting both strategies, each with its own benefits and risks. Proactive CSA refers to companies taking anticipatory actions and publicly addressing socio-political issues on their own initiative, without external pressures from stakeholders such as consumers, journalists, or activists. In contrast, reactive CSA involves responding to external pressures or demands from stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, or media) when issues arise. A key benefit of proactive CSA is that it demonstrates foresight and commitment, rather than simply reacting to external pressures. Interviewees emphasized the importance of anticipating stakeholder reactions, particularly criticism, which leads companies to take preemptive action. This proactive stance allows companies to shape the narrative and maintain control over their public image, often addressing emerging issues before demands escalate. However, companies are selective in their proactive engagement, avoiding involvement in every societal issue. This caution stems from the recognition that initiating discussions can backfire if not handled carefully, potentially damaging the company's reputation or alienating stakeholders. Conversely, a reactive approach involves responding to controversies or media inquiries as they arise, rather than initiating discussions. While this approach may be perceived as more cautious, it allows companies to gauge public sentiment and mitigate the risks associated with making hasty decisions. By responding to external events, companies can better assess the situation and respond in a measured way, reducing the likelihood of backlash or missteps.

Third, with respect to the clarity and explicitness of their positions, companies either choose to articulate their positions in a straightforward and transparent manner, leaving little room for interpretation (explicit CSA). Alternatively, companies opt for ambiguous or vague statements, strategically choosing not to define their positions clearly in order to mitigate risks or appeal to different stakeholder perspectives (ambiguous CSA). The interviews reveal that the choice between clear and ambiguous CSA depends more on the issue at hand than on the company itself. Some issues, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, are met with unequivocal and vehement positions. Many companies clearly condemned the invasion and expressed strong support for Ukraine. On the other hand, on more polarized issues, companies tend to remain vague. They avoid aligning themselves with specific groups or taking detailed positions. For example, on the issue of gender-inclusive language, companies may generally support a diverse society without going into specifics, as noted by Interviewee 8: "We generally position ourselves in support of a diverse society without going into too much detail". This approach is particularly important for companies with diverse customer bases, as they strive to maintain neutrality and avoid alienating segments of their clientele. As a result, some issues are addressed superficially in order to balance different stakeholder expectations and maintain broad appeal.

Risks of CSA

With respect to RQ3, which examines the risks companies face when taking a position on socio-political issues, the study reveals that respondents cite economic damage to the company as the most significant risk. Many respondents describe the risk of alienating

certain stakeholders, or even a majority of the population, by taking a different view. These stakeholders could be lost as customers or employees. However, three participants explicitly emphasize that this consequence is accepted because it is more important to demonstrate a strong stance and uphold the company's values: "Then you have to say, so what, this is what we stand for" (Interviewee 7). However, these economic damages do not occur directly, but are manifested in the deterioration of reputation/image and credibility. Credibility is a construct frequently mentioned by many respondents: A company becomes unreliable when its communications do not match its actions. When scrutiny reveals that the communicated stance is not upheld and is merely for marketing purposes, the company loses authenticity. Respondents equate this with greenwashing, pinkwashing, or other forms of washing.

Interviewees also believe that these risks are inherent and must be considered when taking clear socio-political positions that are consistent with corporate values. They argue that while the potential for economic damage, loss of reputation, and credibility issues are real, these risks are part and parcel of staying true to the company's core principles. By taking a stand on socio-political issues, companies demonstrate their commitment to their values, which can ultimately build trust and loyalty among stakeholders who share similar beliefs. This authenticity can differentiate the company in a crowded marketplace and strengthen its identity, even if it means potentially alienating some segments of the population. The willingness to accept these risks underscores the importance of consistency between a company's stated values and its public actions, as it reflects a genuine commitment to its ethos rather than a superficial marketing tactic. Despite its potential drawbacks, this approach is seen as essential to maintaining long-term credibility and reputation.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the motives and strategies behind whether and how companies take a position on controversial socio-political issues, as well as the perceived risks associated with taking a stand. First, the results show that companies are widely engaged in CSA, confirming the observations of many scholars (Nalick et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The study also reveals that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors – similar to those identified in CSR research – play a role in shaping companies' decisions to take a public stance (Du et al., 2010; S. Kim & Choi, 2018; Romani et al., 2016). Stakeholder expectations and pressure, both internal and external, significantly impact CSA. Companies face the risk of losing their license to operate if there is a gap between stakeholder expectations and their actions (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021; Yim, 2021). To sustain legitimacy, companies strive to align with stakeholder expectations. Additionally, a connection to the company's values is essential for taking a position, highlighting the importance of "perceived fit" (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021, p. 2; see also Koch et al., 2024). The relationship between a company's values and the causes it supports has been extensively explored in cause-related marketing. In this context, companies collaborate with nonprofit organizations or advocate for social causes to create mutually beneficial outcomes. The success of these initiatives relies on the perceived "fit" between the company's brand and the cause, ensuring that the partnership feels authentic and relevant to both the company and its target audience (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Handa & Gupta, 2020).

In terms of CSA strategies, most respondents emphasized that their companies are careful in their choice of issues they take a stand on. No position is taken in debates where the company lacks direct involvement, relevance, or expertise. Companies are also wary of trendy issues. Respondents point out that CSA regarding certain issues and values that are currently in vogue could lead to accusations of washing (see Austin et al., 2019). Diversity and environmental issues are frequently cited as topics on which companies take stances. Despite being considered controversial by interviewees, the approach often involves integrating diversity and sustainability into routine company practices rather than making specific declarations on individual debates. This suggests that the distinction between CSA and CSR is not always clear and can sometimes be blurred.

Companies employ both reactive and proactive CSA strategies, with proactive CSA generally viewed more favorably: Respondents highlighted the value of anticipating and addressing stakeholder reactions proactively. In contrast, a reactive strategy, while more cautious, allows companies to assess public sentiment and manage risks more effectively. Regarding the explicitness of their positions, companies may either make clear statements or opt for more general remarks, especially on topics like diversity. General statements can sometimes be interpreted as strategic ambiguity, which is the deliberate use of vagueness in strategic communication (Sim & Fernando, 2010). This ambiguity can even contradict some definitions of CSA (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021). While a clear stance is straightforward, vague statements might be seen as a form of “washing” – a superficial or insincere expression of commitment. However, there are issues where ambiguous statements are not present, such as the Russian war in Ukraine. In such cases, there is a clear and strong condemnation of Russia’s actions, reflecting a firm alignment with values perceived as non-negotiable by respondents. In summary, companies lack a universally clear CSA strategy, though some respondents described processes resembling traditional issues management approaches. Among the risks associated with CSA, economic damage is considered the most significant. For many respondents, potential financial repercussions are a major factor in deciding whether to take a position.

Based on the similarities and differences among respondents regarding the three strategy dimensions, we can categorize companies into three types: critics, adapters, and pioneers. *Critics*—represented by four companies (Interviewees 2, 4, 6, 11) – are generally skeptical about taking socio-political positions. They infrequently or never engage in social debates unless prompted by media inquiries (a reactive approach) or when the issue is directly relevant to their business. When they do take a stance, it tends to be cautious and neutral, reflecting their concern about the risks associated with CSA themselves on socio-political issues. *Adapters*—the largest group of companies (Interviewees 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 12, 14) – decide on a case-by-case basis whether to take a stance on socio-political issues. They may adopt a proactive approach if they perceive a clear violation of their corporate values in a debate. However, their ability to position themselves is sometimes constrained by factors such as the presence of a corporate foundation focused on socio-political issues or the need to adhere to agreements as subsidiaries. Adapters are also cautious to avoid overly polarizing rhetoric to prevent alienating key stakeholders. *Pioneers*—comprising four companies (Interviewees 7, 10, 12, 15) – are more inclined to take a proactive stance on highly controversial issues and make their positions clear. They view CSA as an integral aspect of both their corporate responsibility and identity.

It is important to acknowledge several limitations of this study. First, the risk of social desirability and interviewer effects inherent in semi-structured qualitative interviews could influence the results. However, the often candid and self-critical responses of the interviewees suggest that social desirability bias is likely to be minimal. This is further supported by the assurance of complete anonymity provided to both the interviewees and their companies. Second, participants can only recall information that is actively or recently remembered. This limitation is evident in the study, as respondents tended to focus on recent examples or incidents when discussing their company's past CSA. Relatedly, respondents' understanding of CSA may differ from the definition provided in our study. Even when we provided a definition of CSA and some examples, respondents often cited issues that were not necessarily highly controversial.

Third, while all participants hold leadership positions in communications, their specific areas of responsibility may vary. This variation can lead to differences in decision-making authority and the depth of responses, particularly regarding strategic approaches. Fourth, the voluntary nature of participation suggests that organizations with a specific interest in the topic were more likely to engage in the study. However, it is important to note that the study's findings are not skewed towards a predominantly positive or open attitude towards CSA. The inclusion of organizations that infrequently or never take a stance ensures that the responses reflect a diverse range of opinions. Nevertheless, our sample is limited to large companies. While large companies provide valuable insights due to their resources, public visibility, and complex stakeholder relationships, future research could explore how small or medium-sized companies navigate CSA given their different risk profiles, resource constraints, and potentially lower public influence. For example, smaller companies may engage in CSA differently due to their typically less diverse but more clearly defined customer base, allowing them to tailor their advocacy and accompanying measures to closely align with their core stakeholder values. In addition, unlike large companies with established market positions, smaller companies may see CSA as an opportunity to gain visibility, differentiate themselves, and create an authentic brand identity. Their engagement in CSA may therefore be driven more by the need for recognition and community building than by risk mitigation or broader stakeholder management. Exploring these dynamics could provide valuable insights into the different strategic motivations behind CSA across different company sizes. It would also be valuable to investigate whether the issues, factors, and processes associated with CSA vary among companies of different sizes – large, medium, and small.

Future research could also extend this study by conducting quantitative analyses with larger samples to validate the findings. Exploring industry-specific patterns, such as in the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for CSA, by sampling a larger and more focused set of companies within each industry, could provide additional insights into how these drivers vary across different business contexts. Moreover, future empirical studies could delve deeper into the role of CEO positioning, exploring this aspect through both qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the CEO's perspective more comprehensively.

In conclusion, as globalization, mediatization, and digitization continue to intensify public scrutiny and media coverage, particularly for large B2C companies with significant customer interactions, these organizations are increasingly subject to politicization (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). This trend underscores the growing importance of CSA in corporate strategy. As businesses navigate this evolving landscape, they face mounting

pressure to take clear stances on socio-political issues to maintain their social license to operate. Given this context, companies should carefully evaluate the issues they choose to address and avoid engaging in every debate without thoughtful consideration. Strategic and well-considered CSA can enhance a company's reputation and align with stakeholder expectations, whereas hasty or ill-considered involvement may risk backlash and undermine credibility.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly to protect the privacy of individuals that participated in the study. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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