

How do CEOs respond to disruptive tactics of employee activism such as walkouts in big tech companies: A multi-case study based on media analysis

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ABSTRACT,

In recent years there has been a growing wave of employee activism in the big tech industry, with workers being increasingly focused not just on higher wages or more holiday hours per year, but also on social justice issues, calling for greater corporate social responsibility and opposing their company's actions (Briscoe & Gupta, 2021). Wu and Liu (2023) state that scholars researching the area of executive responses to social activism have found that firms respond to social activists' demands with a wide range of behaviours, from neglecting activism efforts and resisting change to yielding to activists' demands and collaborating with activists. Although this area has been previously addressed, the phenomenon of how CEOs respond to walkouts in big tech companies has not been explored before from a media perspective. The case studies at Netflix and Facebook show situations where employees revolted against their company's decision to allow certain content to be published on the online platforms. They used walkouts as disruptive tactics of employee activism to express their disappointment and try to raise awareness and make a change in their organization. The findings of the media analysis revealed different types of responses from the CEOs of the companies involved in the study. While the Netflix case revealed reticence of the CEO, as employees' demands were not satisfied by leadership, the Facebook case demonstrated a partial agreement, as the CEO partially gave in to activists' demands. Suggestions for future research include using case studies from across different industries for a wider applicability of the findings as well as employing a mixed research model that combines data from media analysis with primary data from interviews inside the companies.

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AI tools were used in the creation of this work for assisting with composing the list of references as well as searching for relevant literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2021, Netflix employees organized a walkout protesting the platform's decision to host Dave Chapelle's special that included transphobic comments. In May 2022 an article states Netflix responded by delivering a brutal message to its employees: "If you don't like the content Netflix produces, you are free to leave". "We let viewers decide what's appropriate for them, versus having Netflix censor specific artists or voices; Depending on your role, you may need to work on titles you perceive to be harmful. If you find it hard to support our content breadth, Netflix may not be the best place for you" (Miltimore, 2022).

In June 2020, Facebook employees staged a virtual walkout to contest the CEO's decision to keep president's Donald Trump post up that was categorised by Twitter as "glorifying violence" (Price, 2020). Mark Zuckerberg initially disagreed that the post was going against any of the company's policies and chose not to flag it in any way (Nover, 2020), but later decided to give in to some of his employees' demands and agreed that the issue was serious and said that he would review the policies regarding them matter (AfpDailyMail.com Reporter, 2020).

Both case studies are good examples of CEOs' responses to disruptive employee activism. Briscoe and Gupta (2021) define employee activism as "employees engaged in coordinated action to address a societal problem connected to the company they work for." They mention disruptive tactics as being intended to unsettle an organization's operations as well as its reputation, pressuring CEOs to give in to employee's demands.

The cases illustrate the reactions of CEOs to disruptive employee activism. When confronted with disruptive tactics of employee activism, leaders in the big tech industry frequently tend to ignore employee demands, silence them, including dismissal, or symbolic gestures with no substantial meaning (Reitz et al., 2021).

Although previous research has addressed the rise of employee activism and how leaders respond to walkouts lead by employees in big tech companies (Kessinger, 2024), the phenomenon has not been studied using a media analysis before. Kessinger (2024) discusses the direct and secondary consequences of employee activism and examines how employees interpret leaders' responses to their contentious tactics. While this author's research explores in detail the responses of leaders to disruptive tactics of employee activism, there is a knowledge gap in the available literature regarding how these activities and CEOs' responses to them are covered by the media. As media coverage plays an important role in disruptive employee activism, media analysis is an appropriate method to explore this phenomenon.

Wu and Liu (2023) explore the corporate responses to social activism. While Kessinger (2024) focuses on how employees perceive responses of leaders to social activism, more specifically contentious tactics of employee activism, this study takes a deep dive into how companies interpret and act on employee demands. Corporate responses as categorized by Wu and Liu (2023) are "Neglect", "Resistance", "Concession", and "Collaboration". Their research sheds light particularly on the process that makes managers react in these ways, rather than just fixed outcomes.

The objective of this research is to study leaders' responses to disruptive tactics of employee activism such as walkouts in the tech sector, as portrayed by the media, aiming to contribute to existing research in the field and understand these responses through a method that has not been used before for this purpose.

Wu and Liu (2023) suggest future research to include different types of activism in studying corporate responses to social

activism, therefore a study focused on disruptive tactics of employee activism could contribute to their findings.

As media content is an accessible source of information that does not influence the subjects in their responses, which might happen with interviews, a media analysis adds to existing research in the field by offering an external interpretation. As Macnamara (2005) notes, media content both reflects public attitudes and actively influences them, making media analysis a valuable tool for understanding how leadership decisions are judged and perceived by society.

Employee walkouts, particularly in big tech companies tend to gain strong media attention, which affects leader's reactions to the incidents.

Therefore, the research question that this research will further focus on answering is:

"What are leadership responses to walkouts as disruptive tactics of employee activism and their mediatization in big tech companies?"

Two cases will be studied to answer this question, namely the Netflix employee walkout of 2021, and the Facebook employee virtual walkout of 2020. Both cases have received great media exposure, displaying how the companies' CEOs responded to the walkouts, illustrating appropriate examples for exploring the wider phenomenon.

The academic relevance of exploring the relationship between disruptive tactics of employee activism that received media coverage and responses of leadership is to get an insight into CEO's turbulent behaviours and to strengthen the theory by exploring how responses of leaders to disruptive tactics of employee activism are framed in the media. Therefore, the findings of this research will extend the theory on leadership responses to contentious tactics of employee activism.

The practical relevance of this research lies in providing guidelines for future employee activists, by providing examples of outcomes from past situations that include details about the activists' efforts and give an overview of how the walkouts were exposed in the media. The research also provides guidelines for leaders for improving their behaviour based on the outcomes of other activism events either in their own company or in others.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Disruptive tactics of employee activism

In the past years we have been observing a rising wave of employee activism in the tech sector, where employees are not only demanding higher wages or more holiday hours per year, but are instead involved in social justice, expecting corporate social responsibility and opposing their company's actions (Briscoe & Gupta, 2021). Some scholars state that employee activists are nowadays more eager to use persuasive tactics which are believed to be more effective and less risky, compared to disruptive tactics such as walkouts, and prove to be more successful at performing change in the organization (Briscoe & Gupta, 2021). On the other hand, others argue constantly seeing employees of big tech taking contentious approaches for making their voice heard. (Davis & Kim, 2021).

2.2 Leaders' responses to activism efforts

Reitz et al. (2021) explore leadership responses to employee walkouts and note that most of the times there is a negative response, such as employees involved losing their position in the company and leaders not yielding to employee demands.

Kessinger (2024) explores the responses of leaders to disruptive tactics of employee activism and categorizes them from the perspective of employees and how they have interpreted these responses. Activists might experience three types of outcomes. The first category is called “Big wins” and consists of leadership satisfying all demands of employees. The second one is named “Partial wins” and refers to leaders agreeing with part of the changes imposed by activists or trying to find other solutions that could potentially come as an alternative. The third one is called “Losses”, referring to those situations when leaders refuse to indulge with pressure from employees and continue with the previous practices.

Wu and Liu (2023) extensively discuss how organizations respond to social activism, as there is a growing scholar interest for the way in which social activist influence organizations to make changes related to social issues (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). The process-based perspective this theory entails is meant to explain how managers arrive at their conclusions when they are confronted by social activism. The process framework that they structure their study on is split into three steps. The first one relates to noticing the activism: “Firms identify activism risk through direct or indirect exposure to activist challenges”. The second step in their process is to frame activism implications, that is “Firms frame activism challenges as either a threat or an opportunity”. The last step of the framework consists of acting in response to activism: “Firms’ typical reactions to activism include neglect, resistance, concession, and collaboration”. The authors emphasize that changes at any level of the framework might influence firms’ responses to the activism.

Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) talks about how organizations are shaped by pressures from their external environment. Organization, specifically their leaders, might act to reach expectations of the media, the public, as well as act similarly to other organizations. CEOs’ responses to walkouts might be shaped by institutional isomorphism, pressure to proceed in the same way as other companies in their environment.

2.3 Media influence on leadership responses

Employee walkouts are becoming more visible through media, making CEOs act in the interest of protecting the company’s public image and less in the interest of employees’ demands, therefore influencing their responses, as an attempt of regaining control over the narrative displayed to the public (Hjarvard, 2008). Organizational Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995) contributes to the reasoning behind CEO’s responses as they are trying to maintain company’s legitimacy (pragmatic, moral, and cognitive), threatened by public disruption. Suchman defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Therefore, responses of leaders to disruptive tactics of employee activism such as walkouts might be influenced by their desire to maintain legitimacy of the company, as walkouts and protests tend to receive great media attention and expose the company to public criticism.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative multiple case study design, based on media analysis. A media analysis has the potential to capture a comprehensive picture of the events, the timeline, and multiple perspectives of the issue as covered in the media. The phenomenon of contentious tactics of employee activism and the

way media showcases the responses of their leaders to these efforts will be hereby analysed from a media perspective.

3.1 Case Selection

This research will dive into Netflix and Facebook as case studies that show examples of contentious employee activism that has garnered the attention of the public through media and generated clear responses from firm leaders. Tech giants such as Netflix and Facebook are both headline grabbers that intrigue the reader, therefore journalists are careful to not let any detail slide. Two examples of similar situations that had almost the same outcome and have both received media coverage are showing a need for an extensive exploration of the wider phenomenon. The reason why the Netflix case study was chosen for analysis is the great impact it had on the company, marking the most significant activism event at Netflix: “The protest involved dozens of employees and was one of the most visible signs of worker unrest in the history of the streaming service” (Koblin & Sperling, 2021). The media also announced the case to have contributed to a larger activism movement: “2021 was a flashpoint for tech workers who are becoming increasingly activist about their companies stances and policies” (Diggins & Whelan, 2021). The employees predict intensified activism next year.” The Facebook case study was chosen for its great importance in the sphere of racial injustice on social media platforms. The event had a great impact since it related to the movement that formed in the USA after the murder of George Floyd. Journalists in media publications called the activism event as “unprecedented” (Chaudhri, 2021).

3.2 Data Collection

The media analysis was done through Nexis Uni database, and it includes major newspapers, as well as small publications to engage with as many points of view as possible and to build a complete scenario. For the Netflix case, the search terms used were “employee AND activism AND Netflix AND Chappelle”, while for the Facebook case, the search terms were “employee AND virtual walkout AND Facebook AND Donald Trump AND Zuckerberg”. The relevant articles for Netflix were the ones published between October 2021, when the protest emerged, and up until December 2023. For Facebook, the articles used were published between June 2020, and January 2021. All articles were sorted by relevance.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for media articles were the following:

For the Netflix case study, the focus was on the employee walkout in 2021, and the search generated 79 English articles. After checking the title of the sources for relevance and when needed the whole article, there remained 43 relevant articles. For the Facebook one, the search revealed 312 English sources, and after sorting for the correct timeline and relevance, as well as reading the entire articles where needed, there were only 70 left for analysis. Duplicates were excluded, as some articles have been published by multiple sources, as well as articles that broadly only mentioned the walkouts but did not include any executive or organizational response or reaction. Articles that did not include any new information or had almost identical content as others were also excluded, as well as some that had the aim of introducing an unrelated topic.

3.3 Data Analysis

This research follows a structured, iterative approach, based on the work by Eisenhardt’s (1989). The general approach of the analysis is inductive, each of the two cases being analysed

individually to identify patterns in the responses of leaders to employee walkouts. The starting point of the research and the reason for the chosen cases was the intriguing reactions of the CEOs to employees' efforts of making a change in their organization. Stages of analysis as recommended by this literature are the following:

3.3.1 Analysis of within-case data

A narrative was constructed for both cases following a concrete timeline. This facilitates deep understanding of the context and reveals themes for analysis. The two case studies were analysed separately at first. The list of media articles that resulted from the data collection step for each case was sorted by date of publication, oldest to newest, to easily create a timeline of events and slowly form the narrative. At this step, after all sources have been read through, some of the media articles for both cases were eliminated for reasons of redundancy, offering the same content as previous ones, or not providing any useful information for the analysis. The coding started as an inductive process, but was later combined with deductive methods as the inductively discovered codes were later used for new paragraphs that fitted the description. The resulted categories resemble a timeline and are meant to chronologically sort the relevant text passages as well as labelling the events with theoretical titles, while the sub-categories are meant to provide more details about the content of the text. The figure below shows the coding scheme that was used to analyse the data, including the categories and sub-categories.

Figure 1. Coding scheme

Category	Sub-category		
1. Beginning of Crisis	1.1. CEO statements	1.2. CEO actions	
2. Protest	2.1. Event	2.2. Reasons	2.3. Demands
3. Aftermath	3.1. Results of activism efforts	3.2. Contribution to a larger movement	
4. Final CEO responses	4.1. Results of activism efforts	4.2. End message	
5. Cause of protest	5.1. Trump actions	5.2. Facebook actions	5.3. Twitter actions
6. Virtual walkout	6.1. Start of protest	6.2. Emerging protest	6.3. Conclusions
7. Aftermath	7.1. Employee actions	7.2. Zuckerberg actions	
8. Final CEO responses	8.1. Declarations	8.2. Comments	

3.3.2 Cross-case analysis

A cross-case analysis was used to compare the two cases and identify similarities and differences of the narratives. Cross-case searching tactics aim at encouraging the researcher to go beyond initial impressions, to improve the accuracy of potential findings. (Eisenhardt's, 1989). For both cases, the categories had the same structure to facilitate the later comparison. An overview of the categories for each case is provided in sections 4.1.6 and 4.2.6.

3.3.3 Shaping hypotheses

At this step theoretical constructs were shaped from the previously identified themes. Relationships between variables were created, for example certain types of responses from leaders as a result of certain actions of activists, as media perceived it. These relationships are presented in section 4.1.5 and 4.2.5.

4. RESULTS

4.1 What happened at Netflix

4.1.1 Beginning of crisis: CEO's actions and statement

The scandal at Netflix of October 2021 began with the disturbing remarks addressed to the trans community made by comedian Dave Chappelle in his Netflix special *The Closer*. "And Chappelle's latest comedy special has reignited the debate as some Netflix employees have signaled the special itself is transphobic." (Chaudhri, 2021).

As employees began to speak up about the transphobic comments in the special, organizing a walkout, Netflix proceeded with employee termination: "A staffer who led the trans employee resource group at Netflix was reportedly terminated for leaking confidential metrics of the special, some of which was later reported in a Bloomberg story. Notably, this employee was also organizing an employee walkout on Wednesday protesting Netflix's release of the special. A Netflix spokesperson confirmed the termination of the employee, saying: "We have let go of an employee for sharing confidential, commercially sensitive information outside the company.'" (Chaudhri, 2021). This was not the only case of employee termination related to this event: "Netflix also suspended a trans employee, Terra Field, who tweeted that Dave Chappelle "attacks the trans community" in the special." (Chaudhri, 2021).

4.1.2 Protest: Reasons for revolt and demands from leadership

The employees at Netflix proceeded with their planned walk-out on October 21, after Netflix fired one of its organizers: "Netflix employees staged a walkout in response to Dave Chappelle's anti-trans comedy special, and the company responded by firing one of its organizers. (Netflix reportedly dismissed the employee for leaking internal metrics.)" (Mohan, 2021)., "Employees at Netflix halted work on Wednesday and staged a protest outside the company's Los Gatos, California, headquarters to condemn the streaming platform's handling of complaints against Dave Chappelle's new special." (Paul, 2021). Employees came out with accusations for the company: "'The memo was very disrespectful," a staffer told the outlet on the condition of anonymity. "It didn't invite a robust conversation about this hard topic, and that's normally how things go.'" (Paul, 2021), "Critics inside and outside the company have said that Mr. Chappelle's show, "The Closer," promotes bigotry against transgender people." (Koblin & Sperling, 2021), as well as demands: "Joey Soloway, the creator of the Amazon Prime comedy series "Transparent," urged Netflix executives to add a transgender person to its corporate board "this week," and pushed the entertainment industry as a whole to begin hiring significantly more transgender people, adding: "I want to pitch to a trans person. I would love to have a trans person give me notes on my story. I want a trans agent. I want a trans manager. I want so many trans critics at newspapers.'" (Koblin & Sperling, 2021), "With the protest, they had a list of demands for Netflix CEOs Ted Sarandos and Reed Hastings, including funding for trans and non-binary content, the recruitment of more trans and non-binary employees and to "Acknowledge the harm, and Netflix's responsibility for this harm, from transphobic content, and, in particular, harm to the Black trans community.'" (Adams, 2021).

4.1.3 Aftermath: Results of activism efforts

The CEO of Netflix, Ted Sarandos, came out with an answer to his employees' walkout a day after, admitting that his first reaction to their unsettlement was not exactly right: "Ted

Sarandos, Netflix's co-chief executive, gave several interviews on Tuesday in which he said that he had "screwed up" communication with employees after the outcry and that he should have discussed the controversy with more "humanity." Mr. Sarandos also conceded that shows, series and movies on Netflix did have an impact on the real world, something he denied in an initial statement." (Koblin & Sperling, 2021). Contrary to the company's expectations, the employees did not perceive Ted's statement as a positive stance, but more as an attempt to calm the spirits down without taking proper action: "Amid the rolling public relations crisis, Netflix executives have begun to adopt a conciliatory tone while still remaining supportive of Mr. Chappelle." (Koblin & Sperling, 2021), "Very quickly the rage turned away from Chappelle and towards Sarandos. He even said he 'screwed up[1]' for telling his employees, you know, the truth, instead of what they wanted to be true." (Stone, 2021). The image that the media created over Ted Sarandos and the Netflix company was one disliked by the public and by its stakeholders, as many of them expressed their disappointment towards how the company handled the situation: "Ms. Gadsby, a comedian whose specials have been successful on Netflix, criticized Netflix's co-chief executive Ted Sarandos this month for defending Mr. Chappelle. Mr. Sarandos had invoked Ms. Gadsby in a statement in which he defended Mr. Chappelle's right to artistic expression." (States News Service, 2021), "Trans and nonbinary employees are not safe," an animation designer tells the press, "as long as their employer is putting out content that could harm them." (Rosenfelder, 2021). While spokespersons at Netflix tried to explain their reaction and come out with statements that would satisfy their critics: "In another memo, he also pointed out that Chappelle's previous stand-up, 'Sticks and Stones,' was Netflix's most popular and award-winning standup on Netflix, as if that was justification for supporting Chappelle's comments." (Ahmad, 2021), "he also pointed out that 'we are working hard to ensure marginalized communities aren't defined by a single story. So we have Sex Education, Orange is the New Black, Control Z, Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle all on Netflix. '", the media still shined a very bad light on Netflix: "But they give platforms to this content for profit, not necessarily for advancing marginalized communities in entertainment, because now people are consuming diverse content. They are moving towards where their audience is and are bringing them more watchers." (Ahmad, 2021), "These corporations can tout their diversity and the content on their platform, but ultimately it is for profit, and they will give platforms to whomever will get them the most fame and money." (Ahmad, 2021). Still, Ted Sarandos did not publicly admit that his employees were right and stood by his beliefs: "Netflix Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos had acknowledged Chappelle's provocative language in *The Closer* but said earlier that it did not cross the line into inciting violence." (Zilber, 2021). Dave Chappelle was also criticized by his former high-school, after the school was planning to rename their theatre after the comedian and showed great admiration for him prior the incident: "The school cited concerns over Chappelle's Netflix special 'The Closer,' which elicited controversy for his comments about the LGBTQ+ community and transgender people. In the weeks following the standup special's Oct. 5 debut, Chappelle drew criticism from LGBTQ activists and Netflix employees, leading to virtual and in-person protests[1] in front of Netflix's offices in Los Angeles.", "Dave Chappelle's alma mater, The Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C., has put the brakes on renaming its theater after the comedian, the institution announced Friday.", "The school will also be implementing an expanded social studies curriculum with content ' related to political activism, civic engagement, arts

activism, and the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality." (Lambert, 2021).

4.1.4 Final CEO responses: Leadership reticence & contribution to a larger movement

After employee activists at Netflix showed huge efforts in October 2021 to make a change in the company's policies and perhaps change the beliefs of their leaders, media perceived the walk-out and the event entirely as a failed attempt: "But in both cases, at least so far, company leadership acknowledged employee criticism but ultimately stuck by the controversial creators. Responding to Netflix employees last fall, co-CEO Ted Sarandos struck a similar tone to Ek, saying that the streaming giant's goal is to create "programming for a diversity of tastes" and defending Chappelle's right to "artistic freedom." (Au-Yeung, 2021), "The reactions of top brass at Spotify and Netflix ultimately expose the limits of employee activism. Employee activism can certainly put pressure on companies to address issues with everything from internal discrimination to the spread of misinformation. But when there's a lot of money on the line—as there is with both Rogan and Chappelle, both of whom have huge fan bases—employees may not have the leverage to change company policies." (Todd, 2022). Confirming that the company did not agree with the activists' opinions on Dave Chappelle, he announced four new releases on Netflix in February 2022: "The specials will mark Chappelle's return to the streaming giant just four months after his previous Netflix show, *The Closer*, generated a string of backlash after Chappelle made references to the transgender community that some people said were offensive." (Klawans, 2022). To give a final response to his employees, Ted Sarandos delivered a brutal message to his employees in May 2020 regarding the Dave Chappelle scandal: "If you don't like the content Netflix produces, you are free to leave.", "'We let viewers decide what's appropriate for them, versus having Netflix censor specific artists or voices,' Netflix said in an updated memo[2]. 'Depending on your role, you may need to work on titles you perceive to be harmful. If you'd find it hard to support our content breadth, Netflix may not be the best place for you.'" (Foy & Burton, 2022), throwing all the controversies under a 'freedom of expression' umbrella: "We are trying to support creative freedom and artistic expression among the artists that work at Netflix," Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos said. 'Sometimes, and we do make sure our employees understand this, because of that — because we're trying to entertain the world, and the world is made up of folks with a lot of different sensibilities and beliefs and senses of humor and all those things — sometimes, there will be things on Netflix that you dislike.'" (Foundation for Economic Education, 2022), "Netflix recently made several changes to its employee culture memo, which is now called 'Netflix Culture - Seeking Excellence[1]'. Among other things, Netflix inserted a section on 'Artistic Expression.' In it, the company acknowledges that '[e]ntertaining the world is an amazing opportunity and also a challenge because viewers have very different tastes and points of view" (Miltimore, 2022). However, the effort of the employees did not go to waste, as experts state that the walkout of October 2021 contributed to a larger movement of employee activism in the tech sector: "We are seeing a wave of [employee walkouts]," said Jess Kutch, executive director of the Solidarity Fund, which raises money to support employees engaged in workplace organising (including at Netflix).", "While strikes are often focused on wages and working conditions, increasingly workers are taking aim at company ethics and demanding more diversity, progressive policies, and commitments to LGBTQ rights. And they are waging their battles in a public forum, experts say, eschewing the internal pressure campaigns blue collar tech workers have historically relied on." (Paul, 2021),

“2021 was a flashpoint for tech workers who are becoming increasingly activist about their companies stances and policies. The employees predict intensified activism next year.” (Diggins & Whelan, 2021).

4.1.5 Relationships between variables

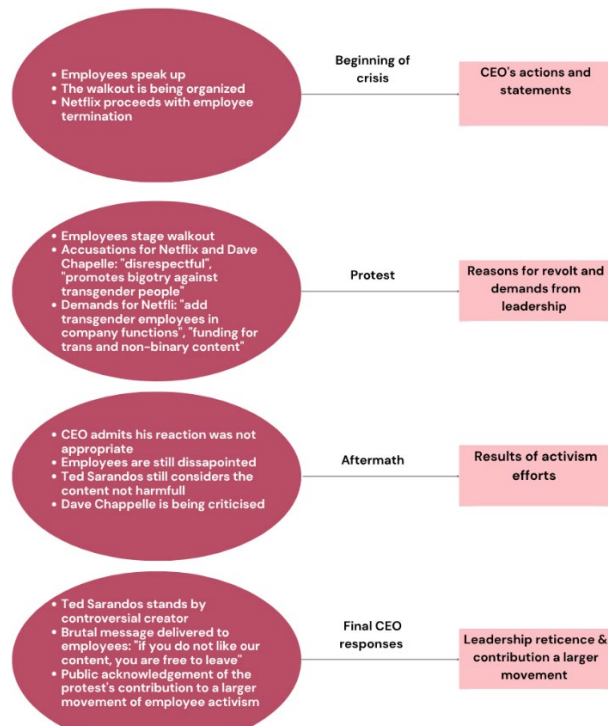
The analysis of this case study resulted in a clear relationship between the variables, namely the action of the employee activists and the responses of the company’s CEO. The company made some drastic decisions in response to the walkout even before it started, letting go of an employee that was accused of disclosing private information while organizing the protest. Still, Netflix showed support for the employees that wished to join: “We value our trans colleagues and allies and understand the deep hurt that’s been caused,” Netflix said in a statement. “We respect the decision of any employee who chooses to walk out and recognize we have much more work to do both within Netflix and in our content.” (Koblin & Sperling, 2021).

The employees chose to use a disruptive tactic of activism, making their voices heard publicly through a walkout, which resulted in the CEO not yielding to demands. Moreover, Ted Sarandos told its employees that they need to make peace with the way the company operates and its policies if they wish to continue working together.

4.1.6 Model

After theoretical categories were created based on the analysis, a model was created to provide a graphical representation of the findings. For the Netflix case, the final categories are: “Beginning of crisis: CEOs’ actions and statements”, “Protest: Reasons for revolt and demands from leadership”, “Aftermath: Results of activism efforts”, “Final CEO responses: Leadership reticence & contribution to a larger movement”. The figure below presents the sequence of events assigned into the appropriate category.

Figure 2. Results of the Netflix case study



4.2 What happened at Facebook

4.2.1 Cause of protest: Facebook versus Twitter approaches

After President of the United States of America Donald Trump posted a controversial message on both social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, employees at Facebook started to revolt. While Twitter took action on the posts, Facebook did not place any restrictions on their platform: “Twitter put a warning label on the post saying it glorified violence. Facebook and Instagram (which is owned by Facebook) left the posts untouched.” (Vasel, 2020), “Twitter determined this phrase, which was used by a Southern police chief in the 1960s during civil rights protests, is “glorifying violence,” and affixed a label to his tweet. But Facebook disagreed” (Price, 2020). The president’s message was related to the ongoing protests for George Floyd’s murder: “Trump began tweeting about the George Floyd protests in Minneapolis, in which he warned “when the looting starts, the shooting starts.” (Vasel, 2020). Facebook employees started to express their unsettlement towards the post, especially after seeing that Twitter had a different reaction to it than the company they were working for: “But Facebook disagreed — with Mark Zuckerberg saying while he had a “visceral negative reaction” to the post, it didn’t break Facebook’s rules. It’s this decision that has prompted an outpouring of anger among Facebook employees.” (Price, 2020), “Design manager Jason Stirman tweeted that he “completely disagrees” with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s decision to “do nothing about Trump’s recent posts, which clearly incite violence.” (Nover, 2020). CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, delivered a clear message towards his employees’ turmoil, followed by a grand gesture to show his support: “Mr Zuckerberg said on Friday: “Our position is that we should enable as much expression as possible unless it will cause imminent risk of specific harms or dangers spelled out in clear policies,” saying Mr Trump’s post did not cross this line. On Sunday night, he said Facebook would donate \$10 million (£8 million) to groups working on racial justice.” (Titcomb, 2020).

4.2.2 Virtual walkout: Unfolding of events and conclusions

Being disappointed by Zuckerberg’s lack of action, employees staged a virtual walkout, as many of them were still working from home due to the corona-virus pandemic at the time, one of the biggest that the company had ever seen before: “For Monday’s walkout, employees took a day off and left automated messages saying they were off in protest. A company spokesperson did not have any additional comment on the walkout and referred Adweek to its original statement.” (Nover, 2020), “The unprecedented activism is to protest the company’s decision not to take down one of Trump’s messages that Twitter said was “glorifying violence.” Trump posted “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” in response to the Minneapolis protests” (Price, 2020), “Zuckerberg’s message, for example, “seems to have the opposite effect that was intended,” wrote New York Times tech reporter Mike Issac, “as insiders saw Facebook executives throwing money at the problem.” (Cao, 2020). Besides the virtual walkout, employees also came out with statements online, as well as some of them threatening the company with their resignation: “As allies we must stand in the way of danger, not behind,” wrote one of the dissenting Facebook employees on Twitter on Monday.” (Price, 2020), “Facebook’s inaction in taking down Trump’s post inciting violence makes me ashamed to work here. I absolutely disagree with it.” . “I enjoy the technical parts of my job and working alongside smart/kind people, but this isn’t right. Silence is complicity.” (Titcomb, 2020), “Staff members have circulated petitions and threatened to resign, The New York Times reported. More than a dozen current and former

employees have described the unrest as the most serious challenge to Zuckerberg's leadership since the company was founded 15 years ago." (Alexander, 2020). Employees also expressed their explicit demands: "The top question for Zuckerberg, which called for changes to the company's stance on political speech, received more than 5,400 votes from workers, the employee said." (CNN Wire, 2020). Needless to say Zuckerberg responded to all of these efforts, but not in the way that his employees were expecting him to: "I just believe strongly that Facebook shouldn't be the arbiter of truth of everything that people say online," he said. "Private companies ... especially these platform companies, shouldn't be in the position of doing that." (Alexander, 2020), "the CEO said, 'we're working with our civil rights advisors and our employees to identify organizations locally and nationally that could most effectively use this right now. I know that \$10 million can't fix this. It needs sustained, long term effort.'" (Amore, 2020), "Zuckerberg also told employees Facebook would review the policies that allowed Trump's post to stay up. "There is a real question coming out of this, which is whether we want to evolve our policy around the discussion of state use of force." (Hern & Waterson, 2020). The media revealed the frustration and dissatisfaction of Facebook employees towards Mark's stance on the matter, as well as the public opinions of critics and experts: "Facebook employee has publicly resigned over the company's handling of Trump's posts. The California engineer accused Facebook of being "on the wrong side of history." (Price, 2020), "It's yet another example of Zuckerberg's inconsistent, often insipid attitude towards taking accountability for the information that Facebook allows to spread. The difference this time is that senior employees are speaking out." (Crikey, 2020), "leaders of three civil rights groups who met with Zuckerberg and said they were "disappointed and stunned" by his rationale. "He did not demonstrate understanding of historic or modern-day voter suppression and he refuses to acknowledge how Facebook is facilitating Trump's call for violence against protesters" (McIntyre, 2020), "Facebook has once again failed to act against an explicit violation of its own rules and has allowed the violent and racist post to remain up." (fpwire, 2020), "It's crystal clear today that leadership refuses to stand with us," Brandon Dail, an engineer at Facebook, tweeted as the town hall was taking place. The company didn't immediately respond to a request for comment." (CNN Wire, 2020).

4.2.3 Aftermath: Employees actions versus CEO's actions post-protest

Once the walkout was over and employees felt like their efforts did not reach the desired outcome, they gathered together to write a letter to their CEO along with other pressures: "On Wednesday, more than 30 early Facebook employees, including the company's first communication chief, engineers and designers, wrote an open letter to Zuckerberg", "The Facebook we joined designed products to empower people and policies to protect them. Now, it seems, that commitment has changed," they wrote. "Facebook's leadership must reconsider their policies regarding political speech, beginning by fact-checking politicians and explicitly labeling harmful posts." (Cao, 2020), "5,500 Facebook employees complained about Mark Zuckerberg's decision not to take down Trump's 'looting and shooting' posts as a THIRD employee resigns in protest" (AfpDailymail.com Reporter, 2020). In response to these actions Zuckerberg maintains his initial position that he is not going to remove the president's post from the platform, but he considers making some changes to the labeling policies: "Zuckerberg in a 90-minute video call with his employees had said that he will not change his mind about not removing the post, Bloomberg reported." (Zuckerberg defends his decision, 2020), "According to Recode, which also obtained

audio of the call, Zuckerberg said his teams were currently considering adding "labels" to posts by world leaders that could be perceived as inciting violence—but stressed that doing so would take time." (Murdock, 2020).

4.2.4 Final CEO responses: Leadership partial agreement

After a week of employee revolt and public criticism, CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, finally brought some positive news to the table, admitting that his employees' unrest regarding the issue was justifiable: "Zuckerberg's message Friday seemed to attempt to mollify that anger: 'We're going to review our policies allowing discussion and threats of state use of force to see if there are any amendments we should adopt,' Zuckerberg wrote.", "This, he said, includes 'excessive use of police or state force. Given the sensitive history in the US, this deserves special consideration." (AfpDailymail.com Reporter, 2020), "He also pledged to study Facebook's review structure to make sure the right groups and voices are at the table." ("Facebook's Zuckerberg Vows," 2020), "Mark Zuckerberg says Facebook will review its content policies relating to threats of state use of force, in the first sign of a climbdown after the chief executive faced a backlash from employees for declining to take action on controversial posts by President Donald Trump." (Murphy, 2020), "We have so far to go to overcome racial injustice in America and around the world, and we all have a responsibility and opportunity to change that. I believe our platforms will play a positive role in this, but we have work to do to make sure our role is as positive as possible." (Sandler, 2020). Along with his new initiative he also explained the challenges that might rise along the way: "In general, I worry that this approach has a risk of leading us to editorialize on content we don't like even if it doesn't violate our policies, so I think we need to proceed very carefully, Zuckerberg said." (Facebook's Zuckerberg says company, 2020).

4.2.5 Relationships between variables

The main variables in this case study are the actions of the employee activists and the responses of CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The employees, not satisfied with how their CEO handled the president's public post on the platform, revolted against it, staging a virtual walkout as this incident happened during the pandemic of 2020. They used a disruptive method to show their disappointment. While Zuckerberg's first response showed that he was not standing with his employees, even though he mentioned he had a "visceral negative reaction" (Price, 2020) to the post, he later admitted that this was a serious issue which deserves much attention and stated that he will review the company's policies regarding this type of messages. He also mentioned he wants Facebook to positively contribute to racial injustice.

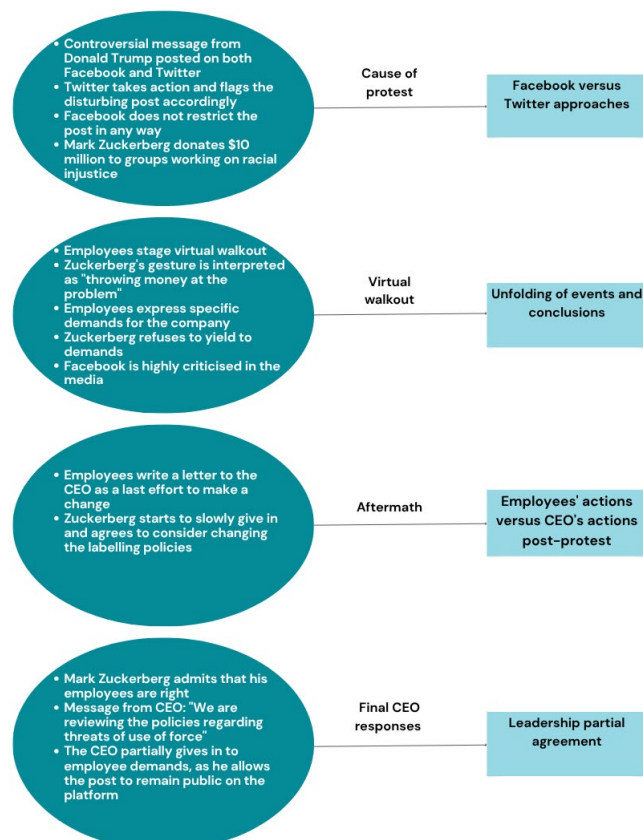
Therefore, in the case of Facebook, the CEO had a positive response to disruptive tactics of employee activism, not fully giving in to their demands (which meant flagging or hiding the post from the public), but acknowledging that there is truly a problem that needs to be looked into.

4.2.6 Model

To illustrate the findings on the Facebook case study, a visual model was constructed that includes the theoretical categories. Again, the events were chronologically sorted and assigned to the right category, to provide a better understanding of the leaders' responses. The theoretical categories that emerged are: "Cause of protest: Facebook versus Twitter approaches", "Virtual walkout: Unfolding of events and conclusions", "Aftermath: Employees' actions versus CEO's actions post-protest", "Final CEO

responses: Leadership partial agreement”. The following figure presents these categories and the events attributed to them.

Figure 3. Results of the Facebook case study



4.3 Cross-case analysis

This section aims to compare the executive responses of the two companies presented in the two case studies, in order to discover similarities and differences between them and help answering the research question of the study.

The results of the Netflix case study showed how Ted Sarandos responded to employees’ staging a walkout. After using disruptive tactics of employee activism to show their disappointment towards how their leader handled the issue at hand, as well as imposing a change in their organization, the CEO stood by his initial statements and refused to take action, as well as sending a message to his employees stating that they are free to leave the company in case they do not agree with the policies.

This kind of response of the CEO can be categorised as a refusal, a loss for the activists, perhaps even a waste of effort.

The Facebook case had a similar narrative as the previous one. Employees expressed their concerns, anger, and frustration publicly through a virtual walkout. This was once again a contentious tactic of employee activism, meant to attract the attention of the company and their CEO, as well as the wider public. Although Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of the company, initially said that the controversial post did not violate the company’s policies, he stood by his employees in the end, agreeing to review the company’s policies.

Even though the employees’ demands were not fully satisfied, leadership took a positive and supportive stance. This response of the company’s CEO can be portrayed as partially positive, a

partial win for the employees, as they did not achieve exactly what they expected, but they did make a positive change in their organization.

The two case studies that this research covers seem to have unveiled in a pretty similar way. The activism tactic used by the employees was almost the same, as well as the cause of their unrest, since they both started because of inappropriate content being allowed on their platforms. Their differences appear in the responses of the CEOs, as Mark Zuckerberg treated the situation in his company with an open mind, agreeing to some of the employees’ demands, while Ted Sarandos, CEO of Netflix, completely refused to yield to his employees’ demands. Two case studies based on contentious tactics of employee activism in the big tech industry show different types of responses from the company’s leadership although the two narratives were alike. It is important to mention that both case studies received an approximately equal amount of media coverage, being described in enough detail to allow the creation of a timeline of events for both.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of results

This section offers an interpretation of the results presented previously. The results are hereby also compared to the literature.

This study aimed to explore how CEOs ‘of big tech companies respond to contentious tactics of employee activism, more specifically to walkouts, as media frames it.

The cross-case analysis described earlier compares the two case studies, highlighting their key similarities as well as their differences. In the case of Netflix, the CEO Ted Sarandos was reticent to making a change in his organization based on his employees’ demands. He answered to the employees’ riot in a very straight-forward way, stating that they are free to leave the company if they do not agree with its’ policies. This kind of response of the CEO can be classified as reticent, a loss for the activists, perhaps even a waste of effort. As for the Facebook case, Mark Zuckerberg changed his approach to the issues along the way. While he first mentioned that the controversial social media post did not violate any of the company’s policies, after multiple activism efforts he did agree with his employees that racial injustice at Facebook is of high importance and stated that the company will review policies regarding political speech and threats of state use of force. Even though the employees’ demands were not fully satisfied, leadership took a positive and supportive stance. This response of the company’s CEO can be portrayed as a partial agreement, a partial win for the employees, as they did not achieve exactly what they expected, but they did make a positive change in their organization. Although the two case studies unveiled similarly, the responses of the CEOs varied substantially.

Considering the model of Wu & Liu (2023), which suggests that corporate responses to social activism are a result of a phased process influenced by multiple factors, both cases followed the “notice-frame-act” process. The companies framed the activism differently, which lead to different reactions from leadership. While Netflix saw the disruptive activism more as a threat, reacting with resistance, Facebook framed it more as an opportunity, which lead to a concession.

Kessinger (2024) explores in her PhD dissertation how employee activists raise social, political, and moral concerns in the workplace. She places responses of leaders to disruptive tactics of employee activism in three categories based on the impact on

the employees, which are “Big wins”, “Partial wins”, and “Losses”. Referring to these categories, the Netflix case can be fitted into the second one, as the CEO only partially agreed with the activists. The Facebook case can be classified as a “Loss”, as the outcome was not a favourable one for the employees, as well as for the public audience who stood by them.

5.3 Practical implications

First, the analysis of these case studies can provide insights for CEOs or company leaders who are faced with difficult situations in their organizations. It can help in the leader’s decision-making process as it provides examples of how different responses to disruptive employee activism are perceived both internally and externally, by the media, by the activists, and by the wider public.

Second, employee activists can use this analysis to understand the potential of using disruptive tactics in their company, as well as the extent to which walkouts and public protests are exposed in the media.

5.4 Theoretical implications

The aim of this paper was to explore the phenomenon of disruptive tactics of employee activism in big tech companies, specifically how CEOs of these companies respond to walkouts. This research introduces a media perspective to the growing body of literature in the field, as the findings provide an understanding on how leadership responds to contentious tactics of employee activism. While Kessinger (2024) investigates leaders’ responses from an employees’ perspective, this paper reinforces her framework through the lens of media. Her theoretical framework was used in this study to classify the results of the analysis. As the research design chosen for the study was a multiple case study, a cross-case analysis was used to outline the findings. The analysis provides insights into the sequence of events and what outcomes they produced as well as the differences and similarities of the cases. The process model of Wu and Liu (2023) helps explain how the activism was framed by leadership, as well as assigning the types of reactions of leaders to theoretical categories. The findings of this study strengthen the framework of Wu and Liu (2023) on corporate responses to activism, by addressing disruptive tactics of employee activism and analysing CEOs responses to them from a media perspective.

5.5 Limitations and future research

First, the media analysis does have a few limitations considering that media articles are biased based on the authors’ opinions, the publication, etc. It relies solely on external public data, featuring no insights from interviews with actors inside the companies.

Second, the findings are limited to the two case studies involved. Despite these companies having a great public importance, the results may not be applicable to smaller organizations. The context of big tech companies itself limits the finding being applicable to other industries.

Future research might focus on delivering more accurate findings based on a mixed research model combining media analysis with data from interviews from inside companies. Case studies of companies across different industries could be used for more generalized findings, applicable to more fields.

5.6 Conclusion

The research question that this paper aimed to answer was:

“What are leadership responses to walkouts as disruptive tactics of employee activism and their mediatization in big tech companies?”

Using a qualitative multiple case study design, CEO responses to disruptive tactics of employee activism in big tech companies, specifically walkouts, were identified. A theoretical model was created to illustrate the findings, which were later interpreted and compared to existing literature in the field. This paper successfully addressed the research question and provided insights into leadership responses to employee walkouts in the big tech industry, which future research can expand on.

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