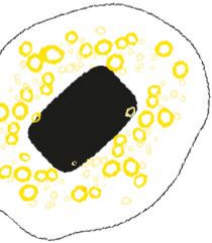


UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.



Corporate Advocacy or Corporate Strategy?

*A Qualitative Study on Examining Organizations' Social Issue Management
in an Era of Public Expectations*

Maren Frister

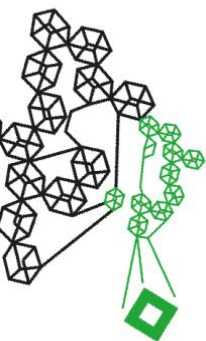
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Abstract

Purpose: Nowadays, society expects organizations to increasingly position themselves on issues of a sociopolitical nature. Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, the prevailing strategic approach to issue management is expected to shift towards centralizing society. This study aims to complement existing literature on the importance of this shift, focusing on the reasons and ways of corporate involvement in societal issues.

Method: Qualitative semi-structured interviews with one expert in issue management and 13 professionals in the fields of public affairs and corporate communications were conducted. Their employers were organizations embedded in branches such as energy and oil, health, and technology with a high impact and visibility in society. The interview sessions ranged between 35 and 60 minutes and encountered questions about the professionals' subjective perceptions of societal issues, the coordination of these issues in their working environment, and their previous experiences of a particular social issue management activity in the organization they work for.

Results: The management of societal issues in various organizations is generally perceived as important, however, the function is not specifically embedded in corporate life. Furthermore, it depends on the connection of the societal issue at hand with the organizational identity and public expectancies towards the company how social issue management is approached; thereby, mainly externally-oriented communicative strategies are applied. The focus on organizations' strategic objectives is always given attention.

Conclusion: This study indicates that companies' social issue management is not solely based on benevolent and corporate political advocacy motivations. Rather, social issue management can be seen as an extension of organizations' strategic issue management practice.

Keywords: *Issue Management, Social Issue Management, Issue Arenas, Corporate Political Advocacy*

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1. Introduction

In 2023, it is not sufficient anymore for companies to be economically successful. The general public expects an increasing involvement of organizations in current societal issues without solely following business interests (Dodd, 2018). Such societal issues, oftentimes of a controversial nature, relate to diversity and inclusion, the climate crisis, the global gender gap or other heated debates that are expected to be addressed properly by firms (Roberts, 2022). An example of organizational public positioning in a social debate is the same-sex marriage allowance in the US in 2015, where many large-sized corporations showed their advocacy for it on social media without prioritizing the strategic advantage (Bogage, 2015). A more recent example of social engagement was organizations' vocal support for the Ukrainian people after the Russian invasion in 2022, for instance, by spreading hashtags on social media such as #StandwithUkraine (Zijderveld et al., 2022). This rationale was again rather based on empathy with the Ukrainian citizens than pursuing purely organizational interests (Smith, 2022).

The involvement in such issues based on rather benevolent reasons and not solely strategic interests, i.e., financial objectives, is regarded as social issue management. The function is encountered in the broader concept of so-called corporate political or social advocacy and focuses on problems or developments, in other words, 'issues', which appear in and can affect society (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). These, for example, refer to a disparity of public expectations and organizational behaviour in a certain debate (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Woods, 2022). In general, issues entail a significant potential for change and opportunities for organizations but are also able to create damage due to the increasing societal dynamics in companies' environments (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017). Nevertheless, organizations are recommended to engage in debates by centralizing the issue at hand and seeing themselves as one of its main stakeholders (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Strauß & Jonkman, 2017). Furthermore, it should not be underestimated how the ways of dealing with issues differ in countries where companies operate (Schneider & De Meyer, 1991). Ideally, companies' engagement in societal issues enhances the organizational legitimacy and social license to operate (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Hydock et al., 2019; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Moorman, 2020).

Since the early nineties onwards, various scholars investigated the management of issues from a rather strategic and policy-oriented perspective (Bonini et al., 2006; Hadani et al., 2017; Hillman & Keim, 2001; Mahon & Waddock, 1992; Strauß & Jonkman, 2017). In recent years, academic literature increasingly emphasized that companies are required to take a stance on issues outside their economic interests and highlighted the theoretical importance of social

issue management for organizations (Luoma-aho et al., 2013; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; van der Meer & Jonkman; 2021). Coombs and Holladay (2018) presented a so-called social issue management model building on former theories of issue management, which did not account for the mediatized environment of today. The focus of this model captures the analysis of communication processes and strategies of organizations which aim to engage in social issues; however, it rather presents a theoretical ideal which was underpinned by a singular case study in their research. A more practical perspective on social issue management in corporate practice was taken by Capizzo (2020); in this paper, a fairly narrow context of companies' engagement in the LGBTQI+ debate in the US was chosen. Hence, the aim of the current study is to complement this existing literature by exploring the reasons and the practical 'how' of social issue management in various organizations. Based on a qualitative in-depth analysis in the form of semi-structured interviews, the main research question "Why and in what ways do organizations engage in social issues?" is addressed. To answer this, the subquestions "What communicative strategies do companies apply in social issue management?"; and "How do the current socio-political environment and the national context of companies influence their social issue management?" are formulated.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Issue management

Issue management is an organizational function comprising multiple activities to address the dynamics in a company's socio-political environment. The complexity of issue management becomes clear in the definition by Strauß and Jonkman (2017), summarizing: "Issue management encompasses the monitoring or scanning of the organizational environment to identify issues and trends, adapt to changes, and/or decide for managerial or communicative actions that are aimed at creating mutual understanding with relevant stakeholders" (p. 35). The goals of issue management are to improve reputation and to increase positive perceptions of the organization in society (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Prahl et al., 2023). Furthermore, the function might serve as a buffer to anticipate surprising events in society, i.e., sudden negative customer critiques or the upcoming of a technological development (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017). This provides organizations with more time and insights into the issue at hand and on developing strategies for getting properly involved (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017). However, the possibility of companies hitting the wrong note when taking a stance on a controversial debate remains due to the high uncontrollability of issues (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), alongside the danger of a consequently harmed organizational reputation. Hence, the appropriate coordination and integration of issue management into organizational life is of utmost importance (Jaques, 2009; McGrath et al., 2010; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021).

Oftentimes, issue management activities are settled in public affairs or public relations departments. Whereas public affairs is directed at addressing complex socio-political phenomena from the organizational perspective, holding dialogue with important stakeholders (Fleisher & McGrath, 2020), public relations centralizes the positive organizational image in general (Davidson, 2015). Companies depend in how they have strategically embedded the function of issue management. Nevertheless, it is highly recommended that it is included in the strategy of a corporation to reach positive outcomes (McGrath et al., 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

To manage issues as an organization and eventually benefit from a positioning in such a debate, issue management activities need to be aligned to the so-called life cycle of an issue. This cycle describes different steps of a currently discussed issue, depicted in Figure 1. Much literature shares the consensus that there are three to four steps which need to be considered in issue management practice, referring to the early, middle and late phases of a currently discussed debate (Jaques, 2009; McGrath et al., 2010; Wartick & Mahon, 1994; Woods, 2022).

Figure 1

The life cycle of an issue based on Wartick and Mahon (1994) and McGrath et al. (2010)

	<i>Issue stage</i>	<i>Organizational involvement</i>
1	Change in public environment <i>Issue comes up</i>	Identify and prioritize
2	Public debate <i>Issue is discussed</i>	Engage, lobby and monitor
3	Legislation starts <i>Issue expectations are already set by public</i>	Act reactively
4	Governmental decision <i>Issue is regulated by government, eventually</i>	Act reactively, media relations, damage control (if needed)

First, the issue emerges in society leading to newly set standards and diverse public expectations, referred to as “change in public environment” (see Fig. 1). Companies successfully address this stage by identifying the upcoming issue. In the second stage, the “public debate” (see Fig. 1), the issue is intensively discussed and becomes controversial as the public interest increases. At this time, organizations can set the agenda regarding the issue at hand and strategically engage in the societal discussion. Thereby, media monitoring supports the organizational success at this point in time as one of the most classical tools integrated into the issue management process. It helps to filter current debates potentially affecting the company (Hellsten et al., 2019; Amri, 2021), additionally to other strategies such as lobbying since politicians and policymakers start to get involved. With regard to these first two steps, Palese and Crane (2002) mention a so-called “public threshold” (p. 285) which needs to be accounted for by organizations. It sets the time frame where companies can still extract the positive opportunities of an issue, actively participating in it and even preventing the issue from turning into a crisis (McGrath et al., 2010; Timmermans, 2020).

In the following steps, organizations are recommended to act rather reactively since there is not much strategic freedom anymore – in short, the status quo is already defined by society and legislation. Particularly, steps three and four relate to the legislation and eventual governmental decisions referring to the topic of interest (see Fig. 1). In the legislative phase, the public has already decided about its specific expectations about the issue and the legislation from sides of the government begins to be shaped concretely. In the last fourth stage, the governmental decision, the government has already implemented measures addressing the

issue. Here, media relations, for example, are a way to be active to at least some extent. The company might attempt to modulate the public sentiment regarding taken resolutions, for instance (McGrath et al., 2010).

Reflecting on this, the success of issue management depends on a variety of organizational factors, as depicted in the life cycle of issues (see Fig. 1). The consideration of the specific issue arena and the particular issue type, however, are not included in this cycle although both factors support the finding of the right engagement approach for an issue at hand.

2.1.2 Issue arenas and types of issues

With the decision to engage in a specific issue, a company chooses a so-called issue arena to enter. Such issue arenas are places of interaction where controversial topics are discussed by various stakeholders, either online or offline (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Such discussions are increasingly driven by society due to the growing public expectations towards a company and are able to control the organizations and other stakeholders involved (Hellsten et al., 2019). Luoma-aho and Vos (2010), Luoma-aho et al. (2013), and Vos et al. (2014) perceive this development of issues controlling the organization as a desired switch away from the classical corporate-centric management of themes towards centralizing topics which stem from society and public discourse. Thereby, the multitude of actors participating in issue arenas leads to a potential for escalation and polarization since everyone tries to enforce the salience of their own opinion (Meriläinen & Vos, 2015), aggravated by the specific frames set by the media as additional participators in debates (Vos et al., 2014). Hence, issue arenas are not solely places of interaction but similarly places of tension where various viewpoints of many stakeholders potentially conflict with each other (Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

The way companies actually engage in an arena, in other words, the ‘how’ of issue management, influences organizational reputation and the organizations’ societal legitimacy (Hellsten et al., 2019). To adapt this practical ‘how’ of issue management to the particular issue arena, the so-called issue types are decisive. These include the strategic or corporate issue, the public policy issue, and the social issue (Zyglidopoulos, 2003). Issues of a strategic or corporate nature directly affect the company, e.g., by potentially influencing its legitimacy or stakeholder relationships and, finally, also the firm’s profit (Dutton, 1986; Wartick & Mahon, 1994; Zyglidopoulos, 2003). Such an issue could be, for example, a strategic management decision which is highly controversial amongst the employees and, hence, automatically impacts the organizational life (Wartick & Mahon, 1992).

Another issue type regards public policy issues, which are, according to Zyglidopoulos (2003) and Rakich and Feit (2001), often collectively debated, for example, by interest groups and the public. This public policy issue can be politicized by legislators and the government (Rakich & Feit, 2001) and even strengthened in controversy by divergent public opinions, especially regarding a proposed solution for the issue. Even though this type of issue originates from externalities and not a company, organizations engage in them by influencing public policy outcomes through lobbying and other strategies (Rakich & Feit, 2001). Whereas the strategic or corporate issue stems from the corporation and automatically affects it, the public policy issue is born in a discussion of a variety of external stakeholders, put on the political agenda, and eventually starts to be of interest to an organization subsequently.

Taking a shift away from pure organizational or public policy-related interests, the societal point of view is touched upon by the social issue. In the last few decades, more and more expectations have been set towards organizations, and companies have increasing responsibilities rather than only serving their own interests, visible in the growing prevalence of this issue type (Bonini et al., 2006; Crowley & Head, 2017; Sonenshein, 2016; Wartick & Mahon, 1994; Zyglidopoulos, 2003). Social issues are “problems that affect a segment of society” (Coombs & Holladay, 2018, p. 79) and connect public opinion and organizations to a certain extent. It thereby thematizes problems and developments which are descending from society and are awaited to be engaged in by companies in the form of social support (Sonenshein, 2016). Although a social issue is not the same as a strategic issue, both can be interwoven to some degree since social issues can also have an impact on organizational performance, reputation, and, finally, profit (Bonini et al., 2016). To direct this impact in a positive direction, companies are recommended to address the public needs on a continuous base and by acting farsightedly with regard to social developments (Bonini et al., 2006). It becomes clear, based on the previously explained types of issues, that engagement in especially issues of a social nature gains importance. This is reflected in organizations’ so-called corporate political advocacy activities, as focused on subsequently.

2.2 Corporate political advocacy, social issue management and desired outcomes

Companies taking a stance on issues of a sociopolitical nature are engaged in so-called corporate political advocacy (CPA). Such corporate sociopolitical actions carry both potential for positive and negative outcomes for companies, depending on the side that is being taken in the debate and the resonance of this viewpoint among stakeholders (Hydock et al., 2019; Bhagwat et al., 2020). In short, the organizations’ stakeholder connections can be both

enhanced and deteriorated by CPA (Bhagwat et al., 2020), which also presents the main difference to corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR activities are often less controversial and not as potentially harmful for, e.g., organizational reputation as CPA could be (Hydock et al., 2019). It should be noted that organizational participation in controversial sociopolitical issues is not always voluntary; firms might be forced by the public to position themselves in certain issue types since it is increasingly expected to do so (Klostermann et al., 2022).

Social issue management addresses heatedly discussed issues in society as a part of CPA. It encompasses the public positioning of a company in a social debate, thereby coining stakeholders' opinions to a certain extent (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Already in the early 2000s, Hillman and Keim (2001) referred to organizations engaging in social issues, but rather in terms of avoiding business connections with negatively underpinned industries such as the liquor sector or with companies in countries violating human rights. Nowadays, the range of social debates increases steadily, for example, from employee conditions to the kind and use of resources for the organizations' operations (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). This indicates the complexity of social issues; even if a potential solution is found, it is probable that not all involved stakeholders, including the public, are satisfied with it due to the controversy it entails (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

Showing a public position on a controversial social issue can help to improve the organizational legitimacy and the social license to operate, but similarly expose risks to both aspects. Legitimacy relates to the public acceptance of a company's actions based on social norms and constructs (Gehman et al., 2017). According to Saenz (2019), the desire for legitimacy can be fulfilled by a firm's openness towards the public demands and norms, also in terms of choosing a position in a social debate and by taking transparent action in this regard. If the company fails to meet societal expectations, e.g., on an issue, legitimacy may still be safe, but if such failure repeats and develops into a public scandal series, legitimacy is in danger (Demuijnck & Festerling, 2016; Canel et al., 2017; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Hence, an alignment between the organizational objectives and its societal environment is necessary for the public to accept the enterprises of an organization and to perceive the firm as legitimate (Gehman et al., 2017).

The social license to operate (SLO) is described "to be a kind of liminal space in which new projects take shape" (Gehman et al., 2017, p. 305), being dependent on the prior gains of organizational legitimacy. Legitimacy is often regarded as a precondition of an organization's SLO (Demuijnck & Festerling, 2016; Smits et al., 2017) and a form of buffer for the actions of companies at a certain point in time when the SLO is not yet ensured; for instance, when taking

a rather risky position on a social issue. If the SLO for a specific endeavour is provided eventually, and legitimacy is already a safe base, there are more degrees of freedom for the company to act; if legitimacy is not fully given, the SLO might not offer enough security for the organization to act upon its interests (Gehman et al., 2017). Van der Meer and Jonkman (2021) relate the social license to operate to organizations' social issue management: "In a mediatized environment where corporations are increasingly visible, society expects corporations to engage with social issues that are part of the political discourse to maintain their SLO" (p. 2). Thereby, it becomes clear that the legitimacy-SLO relationship where the SLO builds on legitimacy paves the way for companies to prevail in their issue-prone surroundings; nonetheless, further external factors, such as the media, should be accounted for, too.

2.3 The influence of media

The previously referred to concept of legitimacy reflects the importance of encountering public opinion when planning a specific organizational activity. Opinions of members of society around a certain issue are constantly discussed. These public discussions are referred to as public discourse (Torreggiani & De Giacomo, 2022), which is the "speech in matters of public concern" (Volokh, 2011, p. 567). The public discourse is both influenced and reflected by the media (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Gehman et al., 2017; Cabosky, 2014), visible in certain communicative strategies that can be applied to put a certain issue higher on the public discourse or underline specific parts of it. The agenda-setting theory explains how media, and organizations through the media, increase the general prominence of an issue in the societal discussion, e.g., through specific headlines and the emphasis on selected main topics (Ogunyombo, 2015; Kuan et al., 2021). Furthermore, by adapting pieces of information in an engaging and even manipulating way and highlighting certain details of a message, framing techniques influence public discourse (Cabosky, 2014). Through framing, organizations and other stakeholders around a debate (e.g., activist groups) aim to strategically drift public discourse on an issue towards a particular side (Cabosky, 2014; Duong et al., 2019).

This impact of the media on sociopolitical life is encompassed in the concept of mediatization (Barry et al., 2022). It drives today's changes, structures, and developments due to the constantly evolving media technologies (Nölleke et al., 2021), also reflected in the institutionalization of social media in society. These platforms make it possible for people to express, share and confront opinions in a facilitated and fast way (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), leading to a growth of public discourse taking place online (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Hence, shifting to the organizational environment, also issue management becomes more

complex and difficult (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010); the company has no control anymore over the variety of stakeholder opinions being expressed on the different media platforms (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuang, 2013). To prevail as an organization in an issue-prone environment, companies can utilize the media to their advantage (Cabosky, 2014) based on the wide range of available media channels to engage in issues and communicate appropriately with stakeholders (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017). Media monitoring might support the latter-mentioned desired benefit by providing them with the data needed to adapt messages to the public's current sentiment (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017).

In sum, social media provides a means to put issues on the agenda and fuel debates by groups and movements in society, thus, being both an opportunity and a threat for organizations in societal debates (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Cole, 2019). Therefore, referring back to Figure 1, the proactive behaviour of an organization in issues is important by utilizing the media and not letting them instrumentalize the company.

2.4 This study

After an extensive review of the literature on a variety of concepts that relate to the organizational practice of social issue management, it remains open to analyze how companies apply social issue management in practice. It is interesting to reflect on the general integration of social issues into organizational life and management, on aspects such as reasons for engagement in social debates, and on the strategies which are applied in this regard. Ideally, the impactful role of media fosters organizations to not only react to developments but to actively position themselves in the driving seats of potential social changes.

To further investigate how the previously explained theoretical ideal of social issue management is integrated into companies, a qualitative interview study with professionals in the field of professional communications, public affairs, and issue management has been conducted, covering different issue management approaches of mid- to large-sized companies in Germany and the Netherlands. The subsequent section focuses on this in detail.

3. Method

3.1 Design

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study to answer the research question “Why and in what ways do organizations engage in social issues?” and the subquestions “What communicative strategies do organizations apply in social issue management?”, and “How do the current dynamic socio-political environment and the national context companies are operating in influence their social issue management?”

The main themes of interest relate to social issue management and its individual application in different organizations with an influence on society. The interviewed professionals were asked to mainly provide their personal perceptions stemming from their practical experiences in the dynamic socio-political environments of their employers (Canel et al., 2017). A qualitative in-depth analysis depicted a fitting approach to draw conclusions about different organizational social issue management strategies and operations, similar to the qualitative approach of Strauß and Jonkman’s (2017) paper.

3.2 Instrument

After the ethical committee of the University of Twente approved the research request, an expert interview with a consultant in issue management was completed beforehand to validate the main interviews. This expert interview (see Appendix I for the detailed scheme and script) supported the development of the main interview scheme, particularly by underlining the importance of explaining social issue management from a more practical perspective by giving an example of a well-known social issue. The expert interview should also provide the opportunity to later compare the results of the main data collection process (Hurst et al., 2015).

After the interview scheme was slightly adapted to the outcomes of the expert interview, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals in public affairs, corporate communications, and issue management. The sessions took place from May to July 2023 on the platform Microsoft Teams and ranged between 35 and 60 minutes. Participants were encouraged to flexibly and extensively answer open-ended questions so that simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answers were prevented and a richer interaction between researcher and interviewee was ensured. Each session was distributed in specific interview parts after a first introduction of the researcher to the topic of interest and the insurance that the collected data would be anonymized, stay confidential and be deleted after the analysis. To further deepen the subjective and individual outcomes of the interview questions about social issue management and its practical application in organizations, a certain technique was incorporated in the course of the questions,

specifically, the so-called critical incident technique (CIT). Generally, the CIT ensures that the participants focus on their own perceptions (Viergever, 2019), mostly in the form of narratives about incidents that really happened in the context of the research theme, also from a retrospective (Wennman et al., 2022). See Table 1 for an overview of the CIT-oriented questions.

Referring to the general content of the main themes discussed in the interviews, questions were asked about participants' own definitions of social and strategic issues, why and how social issue management is applied in the companies the participants work for, here focusing on the previously mentioned own experiences emphasized by the CIT, and how external factors like mediatization influence the company-specific issue management practices. In Table 1, there is an overview of the interviews' main themes and example questions. For the detailed interview scheme, see Appendix II.

Table 1

Main themes and example questions

Interview part	Main theme	Example (Sub-) Questions
Introduction	Participants' characteristics and connection to (social) issue management	Could you please introduce yourself and reflect a bit on how your work is connected to the management of social issues, especially?
1	Perceptions of social issues and social issue management, also in the context of the specific organization the participant works for	<p>How would you regard or define social issues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think that social issues and how they are strategically coordinated by companies are influenced by national dynamics? If so// if not, why? <p>How is the management of social issues handled in your company?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If this is not the case, why?

*Table 1**(continued)*

		How do you think should companies take a stance on social issues, also considering the demands of the societal environment, especially “the people”?
		To what extent do you think that the company’s social issue management is related to how the company is perceived in society?
2	Based on the CIT: a specific example or narrative of social issue management the participant once experienced in retrospective	<p>Could you come up with an example where the firm you work for realized that there is a social issue coming up in the environment and engaged accordingly in issue management?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did the company deal with this situation, specifically in terms of communicative strategies? <p>In hindsight, would you have done anything differently in terms of the company’s (social) issue management in that case?</p>
3	External influences on social issue management: media and stakeholder groups	<p>To what extent did the rise of social media change the way you and the company engage or involve in social issue debates?</p> <p>How do movements and other stakeholder groups influence organizational social issue management in your opinion?</p>

3.3 Participants

In March and April 2023, the researcher reached out via email to 18 potential participants with expertise in the field of public affairs, communications and issue management; three potential interviewees did not answer, and two professionals rejected the researcher's request. This non-probability sampling based on the researcher's own network is a conventional qualitative method (Berndt, 2020). Some of the contacts provided more potential participants working in relevant organizations, particularly at the interface of the public, media, and the company. Eventually, most of the interviewees had positions in the corporate communications and public relations departments or were working in the area of public, governmental and regulatory affairs. Their employers were mid- to large-sized companies in operational fields which were considered relevant for society, e.g., the oil and energy-, food-, car- and retail sectors. For a detailed overview of the professional backgrounds and branches of the participants, see Table 2 below.

Table 2

Overview of the participants and specific professional backgrounds

Participant	Sector	Profession	Country
1 (Expert interview)	Issue management	Issue Management Consultancy Partner	Netherlands
2	Oil	Corporate Communications Manager	Netherlands
3	Chemistry	Corporate Communications Manager	Germany
4	Health	Corporate Communications Manager	Netherlands
5	Food	Stakeholder Manager	Germany/Netherlands
6	Energy	Corporate Communications Manager	Germany
7	Technology	Corporate Communications Manager	
8	Technology	Regulatory Affairs Manager	Germany

Table 2 (continued)

9	Energy	Governmental Affairs Manager	Germany
10	Energy	Head of Governmental Affairs	Germany
11	Banking	Public Relations Manager	Germany
12	Gambling	Public Affairs Director	Germany
13	Retail	Public Affairs Director	Germany
14	Car	Spokesperson	Germany

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Codebook

After the interviews were transcribed (see Appendix IV), an inductive approach was applied. Specifically, the coding scheme was developed based on open coding since the literature which goes in the same direction as this research was limited. Hence, the researcher's aim was to go from specific cases explained by the participants interviewed in this qualitative study to more generalized conclusions (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In total, the researcher worked with 24 codes distributed to 10 main codes during the data analysis process. Here, significant paragraphs in the transcripts were the main units of analysis. Table 3 below provides an overview of the codes. For the detailed coding scheme, see Appendix III.

Table 3

Main codes and subcodes

Main Codes	Subcodes
Issue arenas	Overarching Branch-specific
Types of issues	Social Strategic Combination
Reasons to engage in issues	Reputation Employee identification Employer branding Legitimacy (in society) Alignment with company culture and values

Table 3 (continued)

	Profit
Issue management strategies	Internal strategies
	External strategies
	(Technical) tools for issue management
Professional function of issue management	Embedded issue management
	No embedded issue management
Perceived importance of issue management	No – only little priority
	High(er) priority
Company characteristics	Branch
	Sector
National dynamics	International level
	EU/national level
Role of media	-
Influence of movements	-

3.4.2 Intercoder reliability

As the first step in the data analysis process, the researcher and a second coder calculated the intercoder reliability. Thereby, both coders coded 10% of the transcripts separately using one codebook and the coding software Atlas.ti. This led to an overview of the agreement of both researchers with regard to the coding. Particularly, the more the so-called Cohen's Kappa value of the intercoder reliability goes towards 1, the more sufficient it is (MacPhail et al., 2016). In Table 4, all the calculated Cohen's Kappa values are presented. After the first round of coding 10% of the transcripts, the main code 'perceived importance of issue management' showed an insufficient value (0.5). This disagreement was solved by a further discussion round of the codebook by both coders. Afterwards, the value rose above 0.6, which was assessed as sufficient by both colleagues. The codebook reached an overall intercoder reliability of 0.86.

Table 4

Cohen's kappa values of the 10%

Main Codes	Cohen's Kappa
Issue arenas	0.76
Types of issues	0.68

Table 4 (continued)

Reasons to engage in issues	0.79
Issue management strategies	0.84
Professional function of issue management	0.76
Perceived importance of issue management	0.6
Company characteristics	0.81
National dynamics	0.87
Role of media	0.75
Influence of movements	0.76

4. Results

4.1 General outcomes

For most employees, issue management was an important and embedded function in organizational life (visible in the frequently used codes of ‘high(er) priority’ and ‘embedded issue management’). Only a few participants indicated that issue management had little priority. More specifically, during the interviews, employees explained the alignment with the company culture and values and the gaining of legitimacy in society as the most prominent motivations for issue management. Furthermore, when referring to the issue types, they mostly engaged in a mixture of social and strategic issues (coded as ‘combination’). These types of issues were often embedded in branch-specific rather than overarching issue arenas. With regards to how the issues were approached, the participants mostly referred to specific external strategies such as social media campaigns and other initiatives directed to external stakeholders; coded as ‘external strategies’. The detailed frequencies of each main- and subcode are visible in Table 5.

Table 5

Frequencies of main codes and subcodes

Main Codes	Frequencies	Subcodes	Frequencies
Reasons to engage in issues	240	Alignment with company culture and values	116
		Legitimacy (in society)	104
		Reputation	64
		Profit	39
		Employer identification	21
		Employer branding	19
		Types of issues	219
Issue management strategies	127	Social	75
		Strategic	43
		External strategies	91
		Internal strategies	24
		(Technical) Tools for issue management	30

Table 5 (continued)

Issue arenas	120	Branch-specific	84
		Overarching	45
Professional function of issue management	69	Embedded issue management	57
		No embedded issue management	12
Perceived importance of issue management	66	High(er) priority	48
		No-only little priority	18
National dynamics	62	International level	40
		EU/National level	31
Role of media	49	-	49
Influence of movements	41	-	41
Company characteristics	23	Branch (cosmetics, food, etc.)	17
		Sector (B2B, B2C, etc.)	7

4.2 Classification of issues and issue arenas

In most cases, participants agreed on the importance of organizations to engage in social issues. However, they had different definitions of ‘social issues’ in mind and addressed diverse strategies to manage them. Furthermore, the type of issue, e.g., if it is social, or viewed rather strategic, is decisive for the way and the extent a company engages in it. Mostly, organizations seem to position themselves and show activity in themes that do not only touch upon a currently debated social theme but are also connected with the main business activity of the company or foster positive strategic outcomes. If the social issue is embedded in a branch-specific arena, hence being important for the company’s competitiveness or even survival, organizations appear to be very active in issue management; participants hardly mentioned that they engaged in a social debate to purely support such developments for altruistic or corporate political advocacy reasons.

The way issues are approached in organizational life depends on both the organizational identity and the issue type which is currently at hand. For some organizations, particular issues such as climate change are already self-evidentially part of their DNA. In these instances,

organizations proactively engaged in the specific issue arena. The spokesperson of a leading German car manufacturer (P14) summarized in this regard:

“We don't see this as a debate or an issue, but as a prerequisite; we have to do justice to environmental protection as a company. As a company, we have also committed ourselves to the climate agreement and to the goals of the climate agreement. In this respect, such issues are not debates for us, but a legal goal.”

When issues are less embedded in organizational values and identity, organizations scrutinize societal expectations before getting involved in the issue arenas. This appeared to be regularly the case with the situations around the Ukraine war or the earthquake in Turkey, for example, where the organization takes a position because the public requires this and sees the particular stance as self-evident. For some issues, such as LGBTQI+, the approaches for involvement in a social issue were divided; some organizations perceived engagement in these developments as a natural part of the company's identity, while other organizations only applied issue management to address public expectancies. To illustrate, the public affairs director of a German retailer (P13) explained the engagement in the LGBTQI+ arena based on the company's DNA:

„It has always been very clear to us that the company does not only serve a very individual, singular purpose of achieving maximum profit, but that there is definitely also the demand to do this within a framework that is also justifiable for society as a whole and is accordingly also guided by certain values (...) When we stand up for values, it's also something that isn't overturned at the first sign of a headwind, but that, precisely because it's supported by the family, stands on a solid foundation. A lot would have to happen for that to shake at some point. Social commitment is simply part of the DNA of our group.“

Through these various perspectives, the complexity of social issues and how differently these can be approached by organizations becomes clear. Furthermore, it seems that for many employees, the support of purely social issues is hardly unconditional. Some interviewees indicated that it is important for their employers to address social issues such as human rights or the LGBTQI+ debate, but they still prioritized the organizational strategy. An illustrative comment in this regard was made by the corporate communications manager of a leading chemistry corporation (P3), who reported:

“These social things have always been part of the company's activities, but they have become more traditional, that is, there has always been a donation budget that was used for, yes, actually very local activities, in order to make ourselves better known or to be able to associate positive things with the name of the company.”

The connection of the social issue with the organizational strategy is also addressed in the specific types of social issues organizations choose to engage in. These are often embedded in an arena which is branch-specific. The corporate communications manager of a leading energy provider (P6) gave the example of how their employer decided to take a stance on the issue arena around the Ukraine war based on both strategy and social commitment:

“But of course, this clear pro-Ukrainian communication was also supportive for business because, on the one hand, we could communicate publicly that we are not affected by this, we are creating alternatives for Germany, we can manage that, and on the other hand, beyond that, we are of course also socially committed and supportive in this way. That's a bit strategic and greenwashing on another level. Two birds with one stone.”

4.3 Professional function of issue management

Even though most of the employees emphasized the importance of (social) issue management in organizational activities, it is not a standardized professional function in companies. Particularly, participants explained the ways issue management is coordinated in different manners. Some professionals held a regulatory and public affairs-related perspective on it, whereas other employees referred to issue management as part of the corporate communications function. This variation of the professional function of issue management is also visible in the different organizational positions of the interviewees. Half of the participants were working in the public, governmental or regulatory affairs team, and the other half coordinated issues as corporate communications managers, public relations managers or spokespersons (see Table 2). The regulatory affairs manager of a globally operating technology company (P8) described that the issue management had a strong legislative background:

“I have a special focus on regulatory issues, which means, above all, new legislation that could potentially affect us in all possible areas, because the technology sector is now very broad, I'm not limited to that. (...) In the role I am in, I can act from a corporate strategic perspective,

which is often the case with legislation, because I have to ask myself what the consequences of law are for my company.”

In contrast to that, the participant employed in a leading Dutch hospital (P4) addressed issues as a communication professional:

“I am the leader of the strategic and communication department, and I think it is mostly in my team, that we follow the discussions in media, discussions in politics, also the local politics because there are also discussions about we need hospitals in our cities.”

Hence, there seemed to be no specific department for issue management in any of the companies covered by this study, but the majority of participants agreed on the connective position of issue management between the company and society depicted by the embeddedness in communications or public affairs. From time to time, the sector was addressed during the interviews, and how it might influence the handling of social issues if it is a B2B or B2C business. The participants working in the B2C sector (P12 and P13) underlined that involvement in certain debates could be facilitated by close contact with the public, however, there was no high emphasis on this potential factor among participants.

4.4 Strategies behind social issue management

The (social) issue management strategies applied in organizations were mainly externally-oriented. Many examples were taken by participants in this regard which aimed at proving that the organization does something in terms of issue engagement and is not just claiming it. For instance, specific campaigns and activities were invented by companies such as the development of a public matching platform for volunteers by a gambling company (P12) in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis, the regularly appearing TV advertisements addressing the diversity of a retail organization (P13); or the LinkedIn posts of the CEO of a leading energy provider on the Ukraine crisis (P6). Even rather internally-oriented issues, e.g., regarding the employees, were sometimes used as an external strategy. Particularly, the regulatory affairs manager in the technology sector (P8) took the example of how the employer reacted to the issue of abortion in the US context, addressing both the employees and the public:

“This was the case recently when abortion was made more difficult in various states in the USA and we said that we would pay the costs for employees who had to go to other states to get help, and also made it very public that this was happening.”

Only a few participants referred to purely internal strategies of (social) issue management, where one example was the handling of gendered language in German organizations. When asked about instruments and techniques for handling issues, participants were mostly referring to reputation measurements and the classical media and issue monitoring techniques. However, this did not get much attention during the interview sessions.

4.5 Reasons for social issue management

The most prominent motives of organizations to engage in social issue management are related to the alignment with the company's culture and values for credibility and authenticity, as well as gaining legitimacy in society. In that sense, the majority of professionals explained that the engagement in social themes depended on the degree to which it touches upon the company's values. This indicates that the societal development itself is again inferior to the organizational goals. Although the statements of the interviewees conveyed that the organization's engagement in social issues was on an honest basis, belonging to the DNA and values of the firm, the basic undertone was still directed towards the company's advantage. One participant (P5) explained how and for which reasons the food company the stakeholder manager works for managed social issues:

“As a company, you always have your identity, you have your values, they define you, you also have your issues that you look for yourself and in which you act and express yourself. But also on the question with answers on social issues like LGBTQI+ issues, we didn't speak out. I know there was a float at Christopher Street Day, but otherwise, it was more the things that were close to the company that were commented on. We also did sponsorship to promote youth, which was also about branding. It was not pure sponsorship, but it was a win-win situation for youth development and branding for the company.”

This shows that organizations seem to follow certain values and act upon these in terms of social support but parallelly keep focusing on the strategy goal. The reason to engage in issues for the sake of legitimacy was also named a lot of times. This appeared to be partly dependent on the branch of the company; for instance, the oil corporation and the gambling company covered in this research already struggled with existing negative perceptions in

society, but the attempt to be increasingly accepted was followed steadily. Participant 2 illustrated:

“Putting the people first. That is something we learnt from the past decade, which was not always good, but we tried to be transparent in what we do and we try to have at least the communication with the community. (...) We think, I can state it like that, that there is no way we can work without society.”

Also, the companies which are perceived as rather neutral or positive amongst societal members, for example, a hospital or a retail organization, focused on a growing legitimacy. Measures to address this were not only the alignment of the company values and the issue at hand, as explained previously, but also the alignment of the company values with the moral expectations of society on which companies built on the issue management – for instance, by communicating publicly that the societal expectations are supported by the organization. This was depicted by participant 13, the public affairs manager of a German retail organization, taking the example of the LGBTQI+ issue:

“It was Pride Month, and we positioned ourselves massively again and stand up for a value-oriented society, and we are actually doing this very broadly.”

The reason to engage in issues to improve reputation were mentioned much less than the previously referred to motives of alignment with organizational values and legitimacy. However, a few times, ‘good corporate citizenship’ was brought up in this regard, as well as the insurance of the organizational ‘license to operate’. Profit or being perceived as a good (potential) employer were surprisingly seldomly referred to in the context of reasons to engage in social issue management. Only one participant, the stakeholder manager of a food company (P5) named competitiveness in the market as crucial for taking a position on a certain social issue, for example. This directness during an interview was rather an exception.

4.6 Environmental influences

4.6.1 Social media and stakeholder groups

Two main external influences were addressed during the interview sessions which appeared to have an impact on each organization’s social issue management. Specifically, the role of social media as well as the voices of various stakeholder groups.

Most of the participants referred to the impact of social media on the organization's social issue management differently, but all agreed on the significant influence of this factor on organizational life. Referring to rather neutral perceptions of interviewees, social media apparently led to the necessity for companies to be more proactive in terms of taking a stance on issues, especially due to the fact that the company is not the sole sender of messages anymore but also the public. Moreover, some participants emphasized the more positive potential of social media for organizations, evaluating it as a helpful instrument in discussions (P14) and as a meaningful resource to get input from the company's target group, e.g., by community management (P5). It appeared that such positive outcomes of social media usage for companies strongly depended on the kind of content which was made public. Participant 3, corporate communications manager in a globally operating chemistry firm, illustrated:

“We are careful about the topics we cover, where we participate, and also because we are always very balanced, so to speak, in our choice of words. We wouldn't make any provocative posts, even if we have a critical topic, then we would try not to provoke, not to divide, in that sense.”

Besides the neutral and positive assessments of social media on organizational social issue management, a few participants were rather critical about it, especially referring to the media as source of information. The corporate communications professional in a leading Dutch oil company, participant 2, complained:

“If we say something wrong, as a company, then it will be checked and it is not okay, but if somebody, locals, say they are an expert, they can say anything, they will be treated like experts and nobody will check it. So, if you look at the media at that moment in time, they will always say ‘you are the company, you are always wrong’. The company can say that it is not true, and the locals say that it is true, the media trust the locals. They will not check.”

The necessity of sufficiently coordinating issue management under consideration of social media was highlighted occasionally by participants, too. Particularly, specific strategies would be needed which are adapted to these platforms, not at least due to the fact that social media can also be used against an organization. Thereby, it was referred to activist groups who could use social media as an easier way to raise their voices. Participant 8 warned:

“Activists get a corresponding sounding board through social media and get a voice that otherwise might not have had the media power to make a difference.”

Although the latter mentioned critical evaluations of certain professionals talking about social media usage in issue management, most participants made use of these platforms to take over an active role in the exchange with the public. It was hardly stated that social media was not used at all to react to or position in societal issues.

Coming back to the role of activists, the organizational environment consisting of different stakeholders also affects the social issue management of companies, but only to a particular degree. Whether a few professionals appointed such external stakeholder groups as one of the main causes why organizations are required to participate in social issue debates, specifically much more proactively, other participants admitted that there is solely some influence of activists, but not to that degree that the employer would significantly change its organizational actions. The spokesperson of a leading German car manufacturer (P14) clarified:

“I believe that our company is very open to discourse with environmental activists, for example. Two years ago, environmental activists climbed over the fence at this site and stole keys. Our reaction was mixed. On the one hand, of course, it's not acceptable to do that, but on the other hand, we understand why it's important for people to draw attention to it. We also share the concern behind it. We are striving to transform ourselves accordingly and want to move more and more into e-mobility - as a company, we are very open to the debate. But we're not going to get out of the internal combustion engine directly because that's what the environmental activists are demanding, to put it bluntly. It wouldn't work either.“

In sum, it was more frequently talked about the meaningful influence of social media on social issue management than of stakeholder- and activist groups.

4.6.2 National and international dynamics

The majority of participants underlined that the legislative, political and cultural framework of the country the organization operates in prefixes the specific way of social issue management. Thereby, it did not appear to be significantly important if the issue at hand is a topic solely discussed in one country or if it is discussed globally. Yet, there are some examples of issues which were perceived as more important in specific countries, e.g., the debate around digital sovereignty. The corporate communications manager of a globally operating technology

corporation (P7) underlined that this issue was highly significant to be addressed by the company in Germany, whereas there was less attention spent on it in the US, although the companies had locations in both countries. Similarly, the issue of the nitrogen crisis was much more prominent on the Dutch political agenda, as explained by the stakeholder manager of a food company located in both Germany and the Netherlands, than in Germany. Thus, it crystallized that the social issue management of organizations depends on the kind of issues which are put on the political and societal agenda and how the specific countries discuss such themes. That there are differences in societal and political discussions around issues was illustrated by participant 10, head of governmental affairs at a global energy provider, comparing Germany and the Netherlands:

“In the Netherlands, you have a model where you have a more intensive and detailed discussion between the social groups than it is the case in the institutionalized and permanent framework in Germany. In Germany, however, you also have various strong influence groups that have lost influence in recent years, such as trade unions, and individual particular interests of specific companies have become more important.”

As most participants in this study work in internationally operating firms, it could be derived that the voice of organizations of such sizes is always expected to be raised, even though the cultural and legal frameworks diverge from country to country.

4.7 Summary of the results

During the interviews, it became clear that most companies were only considering social issues if they were somehow intertwined with strategic activities. One of the main reasons to show engagement in a social issue was that this should show alignment with the company's values to seem credible and authentic to the organizational environment. This is closely connected to another prominent motivation for organizations' social issue management: the acceptance of the company in society, put differently, legitimacy. These reasons, which appeared to not only address the societal support on the first line, but also the organizational advantage, indicated the intertwinement of organizations' social engagement and their strategy.

The combination of social support and strategy is also reflected in the decisions of companies on which issue arenas are going to be entered. Particularly, companies often took stances on rather branch-related societal topics, for example, digital sovereignty by technology corporations or climate change by energy providers and car manufacturers. In such branch-specific issue arenas, the success of the company's business activities depends on the discussed

social issue. Overarching arenas such as LGBTQI+ and diversity, or the Ukraine crisis, where the preferred position in the specific issue is already predefined by self-evident values of society, were also chosen to be entered by organizations, but based on different motives and to a varying extent. Whereas some organizations used the positioning in such rather uncontroversial arenas as an opportunity to increase legitimacy and fulfil expectations of society, other companies perceived the support of these issue types as belonging to their DNA.

Even though the reasons for engaging in issues and the types of issues which were addressed depended on each organization and its identity, there was consensus on the high importance of the professional function of issue management. However, there was no standardized department for it in any company covered in this study. Most professionals addressed issues from positions which are integrated into public affairs or corporate communications. Some slight realignments were visible amongst participants regarding how they perceived the impact of the sector the organizations are embedded in on social issue management. Particularly, the professionals working in the B2C sector, in this study, the retail and gambling branches, indicated that customer-relatedness was very decisive for the social issue management of their employers, whereas the professionals being active in the B2B sector hardly referred to an influence.

Shifting away from the organizational dynamics influencing the issue management to the external environment, the impactful role of social media on social issue management was agreed on. This was mainly connected to the rising societal demands to respond to issues, monitor them, and increase proactiveness in debates. However, it was hardly recognized by professionals to be more than only reactive to stakeholder groups such as activists. Instead, most organizations seemed to stay neutral or to take on the role of the listener, but the organizational actions were not changed in favour of external groups. The influence of national and international dynamics on organizational issue management is mainly related to the political agenda of the particular country the organization operates in and its cultural background; thereby, it is less important if the issue at hand is discussed globally or only nationally.

4.7.1 Validation of the outcomes: Theoretical ideal vs. practical reality

Connecting the collected results of the professionals to the answers of the expert in issue management (see Appendix IV for the detailed transcripts) who was interviewed prior to the main interviews, a few inconsistencies crystallized. Whereas the expert on issue management (P1) indicated that companies should extensively focus on social issue management for the

motive of supporting societal developments themselves, it became clear that this was not completely fulfilled by the organizations covered in this research. Even though it was mentioned by many professionals that social issue management was at least aimed at being part of the company DNA, the answers still showed that social issue management was not self-evidentially integrated into the business activities without focusing on the organizational strategy. However, this was exactly what the expert perceived as an ‘ideal’ social issue management, to integrate it into the organizational DNA based on taking a stance and showing ‘how’ the company engages internally as well as externally in social debates – for the sake of social support. Even the most prominent motivations for the participants’ employers to engage in social issues – the alignment with the company culture and values as well as the gaining of legitimacy in society – were disapproved by the expert as sufficient reasons to incorporate social issue management based on social welfare ambitions. A few times, it was even revealed by professionals that the organizational issue management followed a negative past event, e.g., increasing environmental consciousness in business activities after high pollution produced by a car company, or active caring for the concerned communities after controversial plans of an oil company for drilling a pipeline were made public. This way of dealing with social issues was already brought up by the expert, considering it rather critical:

“Sometimes people and organizations work on social issues because they think it is helping them to overcome other negative issues.”

Despite these previously referred to inconsistencies between the expert’s perspectives on social issue management and its actual practice in organizations as described by the interviewees, there is some consensus on a few aspects. Particularly, it was agreed on the rising awareness of the public about the societal developments, especially visible in the growing voices of NGOs or activist groups such as extinction rebellion. In this context, the sector plays a significant role with regard to the involvement of people, as tackled by a few professionals working in the customer-oriented branches (P12 and 13) and by the expert, saying:

“In B2B, there are fewer stakeholders, and in B2C, there are many different target groups.”

Participants in the B2B industries, however, seldomly mentioned that the fewer stakeholders helped the company to manage social issues, neither for the sake of the company’s

goals nor for the societal goodwill, which stands again in contrast to the presented ideal which was advocated for by the expert.

Briefly, the inconsistencies between the expert's suggestions based on a certain theoretical ideal and the practical realities of the interviewees describing the actual 'why' and 'how' of organizational social issue management show that the 'ideal' social issue management for altruistic and corporate political advocacy reasons is not on top of the organizational strategy. Instead, companies seem to mostly engage in social issues if these are of use to them in terms of being embedded in the branch-specific arena and – at least to some extent – intertwined with the main business activities. Only a few times, the social development itself was underlined in examples of participants; however, the organizational advantage seemed never to be trivial.

5. Discussion

In the subsequent sections, the main findings of this study will be focused on first, followed by the theoretical and practical implications, limitations with regard to this study and, eventually, directions for further research. The conclusions will briefly summarize all findings.

5.1 Main findings

The main subject of interest of this study was to explore why and how companies apply social issue management. It became clear that the reasons and ways of social issue management highly depend on the organization itself and the particular issue which was chosen to be engaged in. Whereas the theoretical ideal presented in previous literature emphasizes the trend from the prevalent strategic perspective on issue management to rather socially-oriented issue engagement of organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Capizzo, 2020), this clear distinction between the social- and strategic approaches could not be made according to the outcomes of this study. Social issue management for benevolent motives was rather regarded as an extension of organizations' strategy depending on the social issue at hand. When issues matched the company's objectives, organizations' engagement was reasonable by presenting a strategic advantage. In cases where the issue was not that much connected to the company's DNA, the organization showed involvement to meet societal expectations. This latter aspect is closely connected to the concepts of legitimacy in society and the social license to operate, and the aim to ensure or improve them, as underlined by Gehman et al. (2017) and Saenz (2019).

The connection between the social issue and organizational goals, as well as the aim to improve acceptance in society by showing engagement, depict the main motivations for social issue management in practice. Strategies to gain these positive strategic outcomes of social issue management activities in organizational life related in a majority of times to the impact of media – either in the form of organizations using classical media monitoring, which can also be regarded as a strategic tool for issue management in general (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017), or social media campaigns, posts and other externally-oriented strategies which are adapted to the mediatized organizational environment. Organizations utilized (social) media to their advantage when entering and engaging in a social issue arena. Even if there was an engagement in a social issue for the sake of society at first, organizations made this public. In other words, they strategized a social issue using media to change public perceptions to their advantage, indicating the potential power of organizational strategies on society (Cabosky, 2014).

Furthermore, it was found that the (social) issue management function was integrated into the strategy departments of professional communications or public affairs, as already

suggested by Fleisher and McGrath (2020); nonetheless, there never was a department completely dedicated to (social) issue management.

Summing up, (social) issues and their adequate management get to be increasingly centralized in organizational life, as already proposed by Luoma-aho and Vos (2010). However, the expected shift away from concentrating solely on the organizational goals in issue management towards pure social support motivations seems to mostly remain in (social) issue management theory and is not applied in practice, as crystallized in the previously referred to motives and ways for 'social' engagement. The 'social' issues which were engaged in are similarly strategic issues for companies, impacting organizational performance at some point in time (Bonini et al., 2006; Zyglidopoulos, 2003). Especially regarding social issues which still entail a higher degree of controversy, companies were cautious about which stance to take, if at all. The risk was accepted if the issue at hand at least provided a chance to increase legitimacy or the social license to operate.

Regarding external factors such as the rising voices of stakeholders and interest groups in today's mediatized surroundings (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017), it was found that organizations listened to external opinions and demands, however, there was no change in action if it was not advantageous for the company's objectives. The other external influence on social issue management refers to the particular national situations around the issue at hand. If this national situation is not in line with the organizational identity or even violates corporate values, certain activities still take place if they bring an advantage to the company's performance.

Thus, in almost every aspect, the intertwinement of social engagement and strategy clarifies; it even shows how inferior social support seems to be placed compared to organizational goals. Nevertheless, this study implicates that society is more and more taken into account – even though in connection with corporate strategy – and addresses the public expectancies of today with regards to firms acknowledging their potential roles to drive social change, as stated by Coombs and Holladay (2018) and van der Meer and Jonkman (2021).

5.2 Theoretical implications

The current study complements the approaches of Coombs and Holladay's social issue management model (2018) and Capizzos' paper (2020), which emphasize the importance of companies engaging in social issues. Coombs and Holladay (2018) encountered only one US company with a particular focus on considering today's mediatized environment and the consequent potential communicative influences on social issue management. This research takes a broader theoretical perspective on the topic of interest by concentrating on how a variety

of organizations located in Germany and the Netherlands apply social issue management. Based on semi-structured interviews, deep insights could be gained into the drivers of various companies' engagement in social issues as well as into the intertwinement of the corporate strategy and social support in societal debates; previous theoretical insights solely underlined either the strategic backgrounds of issue management (Jaques, 2009; Strauß & Jonkman, 2017) or the significance of shifting towards the socially-oriented engagement in issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Capizzo, 2020) without taking into account various organizational perspectives on social issue management. Hence, the theoretical ideal as proposed in the literature framework of this paper should be developed into a rather realistic and hybrid approach for social issue management integrating both the different company goals and identities as underlined in this study and the social responsibility organizations carry these days as presented in theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

5.3 Practical implications

Reflecting on the insights of this study for organizational practice, the purpose of companies' corporate political advocacy activities in social issues should be examined closely by professionals. Particularly, as already proposed by the expert in issue management, the fostering of social developments themselves should not be forgotten – the prevalent aim of being accepted in society is not benevolent but rather strategically underpinned (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021; Capizzo, 2020). After there is an increasing awareness of the actual purpose(s) of the company's social issue management, a further step could be to incorporate the function more into organizational management – Jaques (2009) highlighted the importance of this already but rather referred to strategic issue management. Fitting to the implications of theory in the previous paragraph, the 'official' integration of socially-oriented issue engagement could take place parallelly to strategic approaches, however, with the 'rule' that the support of society is not inferior but placed similarly to strategy on the company agenda. By this, the intertwinement of the social and strategic issues would be increasingly practically acknowledged by organizations and applied in a fair way. Such openness and transparency in terms of organizational activities towards the public and other stakeholders could then foster acceptance in society (Saenz, 2019) – a collaborative advantage for both organizations and society.

5.4 Limitations of this study and directions for future research

One of the most apparent limitations of this research relates to the sample – the interviewed participants might have carried certain biases. Particularly, since the researcher asked very subjective and sensitive questions about the activities of the participants' employers and their own professional perceptions, they might have aimed to present the company as well as themselves in a good light even though the reality could have looked differently. This was reflected in the second part of the interview sessions where the critical incident technique was applied; the professionals only started at this point to deviate a bit from the previous 'good picture' of what issues and social issue management approaches are for them and their employers towards presenting examples from reality. These indicated the previously analyzed intertwining of social and strategic backgrounds in issue management without purely focusing on supporting social developments.

The second limitation refers to the influence of the national dynamics on social issue management practices in organizations. Since the researcher faced problems in getting a similar number of professionals from Germany and the Netherlands, it was not possible to compare why and how different organizations in both countries might engage in social debates. Because most of the participants were employed in globally operating organizations, national dynamics could still be incorporated into the analysis of this study, nonetheless, on a more general basis.

Lastly, the representativity of this research could be another limitation. The researcher gained insights into the social issue management practice of 13 professionals working in different sectors; hence, it could be claimed that more participants would be necessary to draw conclusions about the topic of interest. However, the researcher reached data saturation after about 8 to 10 interview sessions; thus, this limitation might be questionable.

With regard to future directions of research, studies could go into more detail towards a model integrating both organizational strategy and social welfare, as suggested previously. By this, the outcomes of this study could be broadened in terms of new conceptual discussions on how the combination of social and strategic issues is coordinated by companies, therefore, shedding a new light on the prevalent issue management practices. Moreover, future studies could narrow down the research scope to focus on a particular branch, e.g., the energy industry, in terms of social issue management practice and compare various organizations in this specific context.

5.5 Conclusions

This study thematized the reasons and ways of organizations' social issue management focusing in detail on the entered issue arenas and types of issues which were addressed, as well

as the companies' communicative strategies to coordinate the engagement in a debate. Furthermore, it was analyzed how external factors such as national dynamics, social media and stakeholder groups impacted the social issue management approaches of organizations. The gathering of insights into these aspects was possible based on qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with one expert in issue management and professionals in functions of public affairs and corporate communications. The findings of the current study indicate that the engagement of organizations in social issues depends on their identity and if the issue at hand raised public expectancies amongst the company, hence, showing the intertwinement of organizational strategy and social support. Furthermore, it crystallized that companies usually involve themselves in branch-specific issue arenas which have a potential impact on their business activities; if it was engaged in issue arenas less connected to the company touching upon rather generally discussed social issues, the organization first regarded the particular position which is most of the times already self-evidentially expected by the public. The external strategies of utilizing (social) media and the organizations' adaption of these strategies to the specific cultural and political framework of the country underlines the organizational advantage, which appeared to be superior to altruistic and corporate political advocacy motivations in terms of social issue management. Voices of stakeholder and activist groups were listened to; however, organizations did not convert this into a proactive behavioral change.

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Appendix

Appendix I – Expert interview script and scheme

Expert Interview Script

*****First introduction to the topic, asking for confirmation of recording and voluntary participation in the research*****

Researcher:

- *First, I want to **thank you very much for your participation** in this interview. With this, you support me so much in **finishing my master's thesis in corporate communications and reputation management** at the University of Twente in Enschede (NL).*

*To get more specific, my topic regards **issue management, particularly how organizations engage in social issues and how this influences their communication management practices and social legitimacy**. There won't be any wrong answers as I am mostly interested in your **personal experiences and expertise regarding issues and social issues management**. You can ask any questions at any time!*

*Before we start with the interview, may I ask you if you agree that this interview will be recorded? Later on, I need to transcribe our interview, but please note: everything will stay **anonymous, no name and no company will appear in my thesis**. Also, the data will be deleted after finishing my study.*

→ I will provide you with a written form per mail afterwards, for you to also have it on paper.

As soon as the interviewee agreed to the recording, the interview procedure will start.

***** From here on, the interview is recorded *****

Researcher:

- *To also have it on record, I kindly ask you for your permission on recording this interview to later transcribe and analyze it. You can always stop and withdraw from the interview – everything stays anonymous and confidential. **Could you please confirm this?***

Interviewee:

Researcher:

*****Introduction participant background and connection to the theme of interest*** >> 5 Minutes**

- *Could you please introduce yourself a bit and reflect on how your work is connected to the management of social issues, especially?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

***** Part 1 on general (social) issues management *** >> 10 Minutes**

- *How would you say did issue management change in the past years considering the dynamics in the current organizational environment?*
 - *In the literature, it is mentioned that social issues have become increasingly important for organizations, do you agree?*
 - *How would you define social issues and their importance for organizations?*
 - *Based on this, how would you differentiate social from strategic issues?*

Interviewee:**Researcher:**

*** Part 2 on organizational involvement in social issues*** >> 15 Minutes

- *Based on your experience, how would you say should organizations be generally involved in current social issues?*
 - o *Are there cases where they should not engage in social issues at all? Why is this the case?*
- *How do you think is the operational field of an organization decisive for how it should approach social issue management?*
- *How would you recommend organizations to strategically communicate with the public environment as soon as a social issue arises?*
 - o *How would you recommend organizations to take a stance in currently discussed social issues referring to corporate advocacy?*
 - o *How would you say should organizations generally respond to different demands of stakeholder groups regarding a certain social issue debate?*
- *What would you say are the outcomes of social issues management, (also in terms of legitimacy)?*
 - o *To what extent, would you say, does legitimacy play a role in this regard?*

Interviewee:**Researcher:**

Part 3 on external influences on organizational involvement in social issues such as mediatization >> 10 Minutes

- *To what extent do you think there is an influence of social media on social issues management?*

Interviewee:**Researcher:**

Closure: Thanking for participation, open space for further comments/input/questions >> 5 Minutes

Is there anything else you want to share? Feel free to speak up.

.....
Expert interview scheme

Interview part and time	Topic	Questions
Introduction (5 Minutes)	Participant background and connection to the theme of interest	<i>Could you please introduce yourself a bit and reflect on how your work is connected to the management of social issues, especially?</i>
Part 1 (10 Minutes)	General (social) issue management	<i>How would you say did issue management change in the past years considering the dynamics in the current organizational environment?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>In the literature, it is mentioned that social issues have become</i>

		<p><i>increasingly important for organization, do you agree?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>How would you define social issues and its importance for organizations?</i> - <i>Based on this, how would you differentiate social from strategic issues and social vs strategic issue management in practice?</i>
<p>Part 2 (15 Minutes)</p>	<p>Organizational involvement in social issues</p>	<p><i>Based on your experience, how would you say are organizations generally involved in current social issues? / How would you say <u>should</u> they be involved in social issues?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Are there cases where they should <u>not</u> engage in social issues at all? Why is this the case?</i> <p><i>How do you think is the operational field of an organization decisive for how it should approach social issue management?</i></p> <p><i>How would you recommend organizations to strategically communicate with the public environment as soon as a social issue arises?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>How would you recommend organizations to take a stance in currently discussed social issues (referring to corporate advocacy)?</i>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>How would you say do organizations generally respond to different demands of stakeholder and other interest groups regarding a certain social issue debate?</i> <p><i>What would you say are outcomes of social issues management?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>To what extent would you say does legitimacy play a role in this regard?</i>
Part 3 (10 Minutes)	External influences on organizational involvement in social issues such as mediatization	<i>To what extent do you think there is an influence of social media on social issues management?</i>
Closure (5 Minutes)	Thanking for participation, open space for further comments/input/questions	<i>Is there anything else you want to share? Feel free to speak up.</i>

Appendix II – Interview script and scheme

Interview script

ENGLISH

*****First introduction to the topic, asking for confirmation of recording and voluntary participation in the research*****

Researcher:

- *First, I want to **thank you very much for your participation** in this interview. With this, you support me so much in **finishing my master's thesis in corporate communications and reputation management** at the University of Twente in Enschede (NL).
To get more specific, my topic regards **issue management, particularly how organizations engage in social issues and how this influences their communication management practices and social legitimacy**. There won't be any wrong answers as I am mostly interested in your **personal experiences and expertise regarding issues and social issues management**. Just answer the way you think fits the best and you can ask any questions at any time!*

*Before we start with the interview, may I ask you if you agree that this interview will be recorded? Later on, I need to transcribe our interview, but please note again: everything will stay **anonymous, no name and no company will appear in my thesis**. Also, the data will be deleted after finishing my study.*

As soon as the interviewee agreed to the recording, the interview procedure will start.

***** From here on, the interview is recorded *****

Researcher:

- *To also have it on record, I kindly ask you for your permission on recording this interview to later transcribe and analyze it. You can always stop and withdraw from the interview – everything stays anonymous and confidential. **Could you please confirm this?***

Interviewee:

Researcher:

*****Introduction participant background and connection to the theme of interest*** >> 5 Minutes**

- *Could you please introduce yourself and reflect a bit on how your work is connected to the management of social issues, especially?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

***** Part 1 on perception of social issues and social issues management and with regards to the specific organization and its operational field *** >> 10 Minutes**

>Taking an example of the well-known social issues on which companies commented such as the same-sex marriage decision in the US in 2015 or the debate around the abolition of the ban on advertising for abortion in Germany in June 2022<

- *How would you regard or define social issues?*
 - o *What makes social issues different from other issues? If not, to what extent are they intertwined with other issues and why?*

- *Do you think that social issues and how they are strategically coordinated by companies are influenced by national dynamics? If so// if not, why?*
 - *Or rather by sector?*
- *How is the management of social issues handled in your company?*
 - *If this is not the case, why?*
- *How do you think should companies take a stance on social issues also considering the demands of the societal environment, especially “the people”?*
- *To what extent do you think that the company’s social issue management is related to how the company is perceived in society?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

***** Part 2 on specific example/narrative they once experienced in retrospective *** >> 15 Minutes**

- *Could you come up with an example where the firm you work for realized that there is a social issue coming up in the environment and engaged accordingly in issue management?*
 - *How did the company deal with this situation, specifically in terms of communicative strategies?*
 - *How would you say is the dealing with social issues different from your company’s marketing?*
 - *If this is the case, why did you decide to not take a stance in this social issue?*
- *What was the outcome of the response of your firm regarding the social issue?*
- *In hindsight, would you have done anything differently in terms of the company’s (social) issue management in that case?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

*****Part 3 on external influences: media and stakeholder groups *** >> 10 Minutes**

- *To what extent did the rise of social media change the way you and the company engage or involve in social issue debates?*
- *How do movements and other stakeholder groups influence organizational social issue management in your opinion?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

*****Closure: Thanking for participation, open space for further comments/input/questions*** >> 5 Minutes**

-
- *Is there anything else you want to share? Feel free to speak up.*
-

GERMAN

*****Erste Einführung in das Thema mit der Bitte um Bestätigung der Aufnahme und der freiwilligen Teilnahme an der Untersuchung*****

Researcher:

Zunächst möchte ich mich ganz herzlich für Ihre Teilnahme an diesem Interview bedanken. Damit unterstützen Sie mich sehr bei der Fertigstellung meiner Masterarbeit in Unternehmenskommunikation und Reputationsmanagement an der Universität Twente in Enschede (NL).

Genauer gesagt geht es bei meinem Thema um **Issue Management, insbesondere darum, wie sich Organisationen in sozialen Frage- und Problemstellungen engagieren** und wie sich dies auf **ihre Kommunikationsmanagementpraktiken und ihre soziale Legitimität** auswirkt. Es gibt keine falschen Antworten, denn ich bin vor allem an Ihren persönlichen Erfahrungen und Ihrem Fachwissen in Bezug auf Themen und **soziales Themenmanagement** interessiert. Antworten Sie einfach so, wie Sie es für richtig halten, und Sie können jederzeit Fragen stellen!

Bevor wir mit dem Interview beginnen, möchte ich Sie fragen, ob Sie damit einverstanden sind, dass dieses Gespräch aufgezeichnet wird. Später muss ich unser Gespräch transkribieren, aber bitte beachten Sie noch einmal: Alles bleibt anonym, kein Name und kein Unternehmen werden in meiner Arbeit erscheinen. Außerdem werden die Daten nach Abschluss meiner Studie gelöscht.

***** Ab hier wird das Interview aufgenommen (nach Bestätigung)*****

Researcher:

- Um das Gespräch auch aufzeichnen zu können, bitte ich Sie um Ihr Einverständnis, dieses Interview aufzuzeichnen, um es später zu transkribieren und zu analysieren. Sie können das Interview jederzeit abbrechen und sich zurückziehen - alles bleibt anonym und vertraulich. **Könnten Sie dies bitte bestätigen?**

Interviewee:

Researcher:

*****Einführung Teilnehmerhintergrund und Zusammenhang mit dem Thema*** >> 5 Minuten**

- **Könnten Sie sich bitte vorstellen und insbesondere darüber reflektieren, wie Ihre Arbeit mit dem Management sozialer Frage- und Problemstellungen zusammenhängt?**

Interviewee:

Researcher:

***** Teil 1 über die Wahrnehmung sozialer Fragen und das Management sozialer Frage- und Problemstellungen in Bezug auf die spezifische Organisation und ihren Tätigkeitsbereich *** >> 10 Minuten**
>Beispielhaft für die bekannten gesellschaftlichen Themen, zu denen sich Unternehmen geäußert haben, wie die Entscheidung zur gleichgeschlechtlichen Ehe in den USA im Jahr 2015 oder die Debatte um die Abschaffung des Werbeverbots für Abtreibungen in Deutschland im Juni 2022<

Wie würden Sie soziale Frage- und Problemstellungen bzw Social Issues DEFINIEREN?

- **Wodurch UNTERSCHIEDEN sich soziale Issues von anderen Arten von Issues? Wenn nicht, inwieweit sind sie mit anderen Issues verwoben und warum?**
- **Sind Sie der Meinung, dass soziale Issues und die Art und Weise, wie sie von Unternehmen strategisch koordiniert werden, von der NATIONALE DYNAMIK beeinflusst werden? Wenn ja// wenn nicht, warum?**
- **Wie wird der UMGANG mit sozialen Problemstellungen in IHREM UNTERNEHMEN gehandhabt?**
- **Wenn dies nicht der Fall ist, warum?**

- *Wie hängt Ihrer Meinung nach das Engagement für soziale Belange generell mit dem TÄTIGKEITSBEREICH/der Branche Ihres Unternehmens zusammen?*
- *Wie sollten Unternehmen Ihrer Meinung nach zu sozialen Fragen Stellung beziehen, auch unter Berücksichtigung der ANFORDERUNGEN DES GESELLSCHAFTLICHEN UMFELDS?*
- *Inwieweit hängt Ihrer Meinung nach das Sozialmanagement des Unternehmens damit zusammen, wie das Unternehmen in der Gesellschaft WAHRGENOMMEN wird?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

TECHNIK DER KRITISCHEN EREIGNISSE

***** Teil 2 über ein konkretes Beispiel/eine Erzählung, die sie einmal erlebt haben, in der Retrospektive *** >>**

15 Minuten

- *Können Sie ein BEISPIEL nennen, bei dem das Unternehmen, für das Sie arbeiten, erkannt hat, dass ein soziales Problem bzw Issue in der Umgebung auftaucht, und sich dementsprechend im Issue Management engagiert hat?*
- *Wie ist das Unternehmen mit dieser Situation umgegangen, insbesondere im Hinblick auf KOMMUNIKATIVE STRATEGIEN?*
- *Wenn dies der Fall ist, warum haben Sie sich entschieden, in einer sozialen Frage- und Problemstellung NICHT STELLUNG zu beziehen?*
- *Was war das ERGEBNIS DER REAKTION Ihres Unternehmens auf das soziale Issue?*
- *Hätten Sie in diesem Fall RÜCKBLICKEND ETWAS ANDERS gemacht, was das (soziale) Management des Unternehmens betrifft?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

Teil 3 über externe Einflüsse: Medien und Interessengruppen * >> 10 Minuten**

- *Inwieweit hat das Aufkommen der SOZIALE MEDIEN die Art und Weise verändert, wie Sie und Ihr Unternehmen sich in Debatten über soziale Themen einbringen?*
- *Wie beeinflussen Ihrer Meinung nach BEWEGUNGEN UND STAKEHOLDERGRUPPEN das organisatorische Management sozialer Issues?*

Interviewee:

Researcher:

*****Schließung: Dank für die Teilnahme, Raum für weitere Kommentare/Eingaben/Fragen*** >> 5**

Minuten

.....
Gibt es noch etwas, das Sie uns mitteilen möchten? Fühlen Sie sich frei, etwas zu sagen.

Interview scheme

Interview part and time	Topic	Questions
Introduction (5 Minutes)	Participant background and connection to the theme of interest	<i>Could you please introduce yourself and reflect a bit on how your work is connected to the</i>

		<i>management of social issues, especially?</i>
Part 1 (10 Minutes)	Perception of social issues and social issues management and with regards to the specific organization and its operational field	<p><i>How would you regard or define social issues?</i> (prior to this, I want to take an example of well-known social issues on which companies commented such as the same-sex marriage decision in the US in 2015 or the debate around the abolition of the ban on advertising for abortion in Germany in June 2022)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>What makes social issues different from other issues? If not, to what extent are they intertwined with other issues and why?</i> - <i>Do you think that social issues and how they are strategically coordinated by companies are influenced by national dynamics? If so, if not, why?</i> <p><i>How is the management of social issues handled in your company?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Why is your company engaging in social issues, if this is the case // why not?</i> - <i>In general, how do you think is this involvement in social issues connected to the branch of your company?</i> - <i>How do you think should companies take a stance on social issues also considering the demands</i>

		<p><i>of the societal environment, especially “the people”?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>To what extent do you think that the company’s social issue management is related to how the company is perceived in society?</i>
<p>Part 2 (15 Minutes) <i>USING CIT</i></p>	<p>Specific example/narrative they once experienced in retrospective</p>	<p><i>Could you come up with an example where the firm you work for realized that there is a social issue coming up in the environment and engaged accordingly in issue management?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>How did the company deal with this situation, specifically in terms of communicative strategies?</i> - <i>How would you say is the dealing with social issues different from your company’s marketing?</i> - <i>If this is the case, why did you decide to <u>not</u> take a stance in this social issue?</i> <p><i>What was the outcome of the response of your firm regarding the social issue?</i></p> <p><i>In hindsight, would you have done anything differently in terms of the company’s (social) issue management in that case?</i></p>
<p>Part 3 (10 Minutes)</p>	<p>External influences: media and stakeholder groups</p>	<p><i>To what extent did the rise of social media changed the way you and the company you engage or involve in social issue debates?</i></p>

		<i>How do movements and other stakeholder groups influence organizational social issue management in your opinion?</i>
Closure (5 Minutes)	Thanking for participation, open space for further comments/input/questions	<i>Is there anything else you want to share? Feel free to speak up.</i>

Appendix III – Coding scheme

(HIGHER ABSTRACTION LEVEL)	Code	Subcode	Definition	Example
Issue definition/connotation/denotation	Issue arenas	Overarching	E.g., Ukraine war, diversity, gender, Climate change, LGBTQI+, BLM, music and culture, youth support → Arenas which are not related to a specific branch	<p><i>“The topic of digital sovereignty, as a social topic, is European, but especially a German topic, because it has been put high on the political agenda here.”</i></p> <p><i>“An essential topic that has been relevant for a long time, even if it has been discussed for quite a while, is the whole decarbonization path.”</i></p> <p><i>“Or also certain factual processes (as part of the social issue), that can also be the case, for example a war zone, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine or technological leaps.”</i></p>
		Branch-specific	e.g., animal protection in cosmetics or food; employee treatment and loans in production; sustainability in energy sector → Arenas which are directly connected to a specific branch or sector	<i>“We want to reinject the water under the oil field there, so there is a lot of things going on and a lot of public debate.”</i>

	Types of issues	Social	Social issue as problem or current debate stemming from society and depicting no economic outcome for an organization if it engages in it	<p><i>“I would say that a social issue arises from social debates that arise and are conducted in one place and which, for whatever reason, have relevance for the company.”</i></p> <p><i>“There are social issues that come onto the agenda of the company and demand a response from it in some form.”</i></p> <p><i>“Social issues are very individual decisions that are difficult to try to characterize with generic practices.”</i></p> <p><i>“The social issue is probably viewed from a broader perspective. Namely, the stakeholders asking the questions of such a debate are then others as strategic ones, and potentially the whole population, and the simple</i></p>
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			<i>question of how certain policies affect the population are parts of it.”</i>
		Strategic	<p>An issue which concerns a relevant field a company is connected to and hence, this issue is directly intertwined with the economic/strategic outcomes of the organization</p> <p>“You can act from a corporate strategic perspective, which is often the case with legislation, because it has to be asked what the consequences of a specific law are for the company, which does not automatically mean that this law is rejected, but rather that it is implemented, and then practically from the interface function between internal and external, entering into a dialogue with politics in order to point out difficulties in the implementation. This is an internal strategic perspective and view.”</p>
		Combination	<p>An Issue with two sides: It stems from society, but also</p> <p>“I can’t separate social issues</p>

			has a strategic impact on the company	<i>from the strategy of the company. All aspects that come up somewhere, economic, social, political, I wouldn't want to differentiate or exclude something like that."</i>
Issue strategy	Reasons to engage in issues	Reputation	Either to maintain, develop or enhance a stable reputation or as mitigation in case of hard times	<i>"A company that behaves like a pig when you say, 'Oh God, how do they treat the employees, how do they treat the population, or even the environment?' They clearly have a loss of reputation."</i>
		Employee identification	Organization manages (social) issues for its employees (from an internal perspective) being a cross-section of society. These can then better identify with the company as "their" issues (as members of society) are also treated by the company they work for.	<i>"We are acting in the interest of our stakeholders. Of course, this also includes employees."</i>
		Employer branding	(Social) issue engagement in the organization to be externally perceived as a good employer (from the external perspective)	<i>"Of course it has a very strong effect on society when a company positions itself. It is also perceived and continuously used as employer branding to increase</i>

				<i>employer attractiveness.</i> "
		Alignment with company culture and values	It is engaged in a (societal) issue if it is "fitting" to the company values, its culture, its leader etc. and if there is no danger that social issue engagement could be seen as "hypocrisy". Thereby, the company aims to stay credible.	<p><i>"You need to be concerned and have the competence to find solutions. To only participate in a debate but not be able to contribute to a solution yourself is a slippery slope which you can easily slip on. That also has a lot to do with credibility."</i></p> <p><i>"XXX does something like that (issue engagement) when it's about their own company values that are affected, maybe even violated by measures, then they take a position accordingly."</i></p> <p><i>"A company can say for example for good reasons that they are neutral in such debates because they do not represent a credible player, that is inconceivable."</i></p>

				<p><i>„In the end, I think it (issue engagement) depends very much on the leadership personality, the CEO. These are individual leadership decisions at the absolute Top management level, precisely because there is no economically clear coordinate system that speaks for one thing or another. And when it comes to LGBTQI+ for example, we are quite clearly positioned globally and that is certainly due to a certain attitude of the CEO, yes.“</i></p> <p><i>„It is leadership culture, ultimately, the engagement or positioning in issues that decides these things.“</i></p>
		legitimacy (in society)	To be “allowed” to operate in society, acceptance in society	<i>“If you have a low local impact or you are just a</i>

			<p><i>reseller, or whatever, the impact on society is almost zero. But if you are a company that has impact on the environment, or in the area, lets say windmills, then you have to connect with the people, you have to make sure that they are part of your plans.”</i></p> <p><i>“In Germany, we try to present ourselves as a ‘good citizen’.” (I 7)</i></p> <p><i>“What we are also doing, we just opened a windpark in the xxx area and they made the local community, I think 18% are co-owners of the solar and wind park.”</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t necessarily think that the primary goal of these decisions of positioning on a social issue is something like that, but that is</i></p>
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				<i>something that you are aware of, that the perception of the company in society is influenced by it.”</i>
		Profit	Engagement with public in issues to stay economically successful	<i>“We just said, if we can have our activities, we make sure that your concerns (of the people) are away, we are willing to invest in your village.”</i>
	Issue management strategies	Internal strategies	e.g., internal campaigns/regulations/intranet usage to tackle a (social) issue	<i>“I’m also thinking about what we’re doing at xxx in the meantime, on our intranet platform, where things like Pridemonth are discussed. Something like that would not have existed 15-20 years ago, not necessarily.”</i> <i>“I have to say that I rarely had the feeling from the outside that such debates influence the company from the outside, but rather that the company then internally orients itself a bit to these debates that are going on and adopts and develops its own</i>

				<p><i>communication strategies.”</i></p> <p><i>“For this project, we have already thought about our own communication, also in the direct approach to employees, in the possibility of communicating about it, with our own possibilities and reports, but at that time our internal company intranet was not yet so developed that we could already do more with pictures and sound or so. We did what we could.”</i></p>
		<p>External strategies</p>	<p>external charity projects; own foundations; social media statements/posts, but also explanations and statements to the public/local communities, engaging in public dialogue</p>	<p><i>“A vivid example was, e.g., sinking an underwater computer centre in a tank, which worked autonomously, but because it is underwater, the whole cooling system which consumes a lot of energy in such a computer centre, is not necessary. And this was a very nice demonstration</i></p>

			<p><i>, a thing that was picked up by the media all over the world. So it is not just about making a statement, its about proving that things are being done.”</i></p> <p><i>“At this moment in time, we try to be honest, transparent, to be engaging and talk to people, taking their complaints and worries serious and try to address the worries.”</i></p> <p><i>“We invited people (from Mexico) to have a tour and contact with the local community (in Netherlands) to see how things were happening, to ensure what we were planning in the US would not “infect” them, getting a disease or so.”</i></p> <p><i>“In the work I am doing right now, what we do is a lot of local engagement, where we</i></p>
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				<p><i>actually really go to the local municipalities and ask them. Normally, you would put an ad in the local paper, saying we want to do this. And people who are against it can write a letter to the municipalities. (...). And what we do right now is that we prior to putting anything out, is going to the local communities.”</i></p>
		(Technical) tools for issue management	e.g. Media monitoring, market research, surveys, etc.	

Company dynamics	Professional function of issue management	Embedded issue management	Issue management is strategically embedded in management function and communications (e.g., Public Affairs/Corporate Affairs/Corporate Communications)	<p><i>“We are the first company to be honest, that has social issues on top of their minds, so we have integrated all the social issues in the management, what we do with every step we take, (...) the first thing we say is: what is the impact of the people.”</i></p> <p><i>“You have to do that together with the communication team as CEO. For the company in issue management.”</i></p>
		No embedded issue management	Issue management is not distributed to a specific department, mostly spontaneously taken over by different departments depending on the topic itself	<p><i>“I think it's actually a little harder to say from a communication point of view. Partly, it was the strategy or sustainability or CSR department that took care of these social issues. Then more from the professional point of view (...). Or in the case of diversity, these are rather</i></p>

				<i>separate professional departments. Otherwise, I would say that we do spend attention on all issues in general.”</i>
	Perceived importance of Issue management	No – only little priority	Issue Management is perceived as highly important for the company’s management, strategy, etc., or is rather running as a secondary matter.	<i>“The company is primarily concerned with ensuring that the business is the focus of communication, that our topics are well placed, that people keep saying that we are green, we are building something new, we are in a merger, we are building new wind farms, we have signed this and that. In other words, communication should be clearly focused on corporate success, and in the long term I think there is also the ambition to say: Turning Point, then we can distribute our values beyond that and define ourselves as a company a</i>

				<p><i>little more strongly, but I currently have the feeling that this is a little lacking.”</i></p>
		<p>High(er) priority</p>		<p><i>“We are the first company to be honest, that has social issues on top of their minds, so we have integrated all the social issues in the management, what we do with every step we take, (..) the first thing we say is: what is the impact of the people.”</i></p> <p><i>“And the dairy company where I worked, we have always considered which topics we actively enter into discussion and which topics we only answer reactively and in what detail, because certain debates we cannot win at a certain point, and then of course at some point it is also the point where you say, don't say anything or do, you have to look.”</i></p>

	Company characteristics	branch	(Social) issue management practice influenced by the branch of company, e.g., if it is cosmetics, food, energy, etc.	<i>“The issues of a cosmetics, energy and other industry will be different from the digital industry. I’m saying that there will always have to be a connection between the company’s interests in some form. Topics that are completely outside of that are probably more likely to be ignored now.”</i>
		sector	(Social) issue management practices influenced by the sector of the company, e.g., B2B or B2C.	<i>“If you say I am buying as a business to individual consumers, then it is easier than if you have B2B where you are only with other big companies. (...) You have less contact with people.”</i>
Societal (external) dynamics	National dynamics	International level	(Social) issue management is adapted to national regulations, conditions and politics (e.g., related to Europe compared to the US or Saudi Arabia)	<i>“There is no way we can work without society. In the past, especially in the Netherlands it is really strange that everything about one</i>

			<p><i>meter under the ground belongs to the state. In America, if you have an oil field under the house, you are rich. (...)</i></p> <p><i>In Germany, I think 50% of the taxes goes to the local community and that is not the case in the Netherlands.”</i></p> <p><i>“Now, everything that is local, becomes national, international even.”</i></p> <p><i>“In Germany we try to present ourselves as a good citizen that takes this issue (...) seriously and makes a contribution to it, but from the US perspective it is more about mitigating such an issue. So the handling is different because the role of our company in the US, in Germany, in Europe, is different.”</i></p>
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				<p><i>“In Munich, xxx always has its own car at the CSD, but that wouldn’t necessarily happen in Saudi Arabia.”</i></p>
		EU/National level	<p>Inside the EU/Europe, the (social) issue management practice has more similarities (or not) comparing e.g., the Netherlands and Germany.</p>	<p><i>“There are differences in the respective nation states, . They exist within Europe, within the EU as well, but I believe it become even greater when we go out more globally.”</i></p>
	Role of media	-	<p>media influence (social) issue management positively or negatively or neutral, e.g., it mirrors and communicates demands of public; makes feedback loops possible (also for criticism and negative spirals); provides an open and discursive platform; public is more reachable from sides of the company</p>	<p><i>“A social issue is born from a small group of people, and it becomes a social issue, due to media. So what you see a lot in the Netherlands, that a really small group of people can put up a frame, that everybody is against your activity, and the media is loving that.”</i></p> <p><i>“I will be honest, the media will go for the negative side and they will go for the locals, for the people.”</i></p>

	Influence of movements	-	Influence of stakeholder groups such as activists on (social) issue management. E.g., the company reacts, listens, and/or is open to discourse with activists, for example. The actual organizational behaviour might be influenced or not by this.	<p><i>“There was an action group that held a session this week, ¾ of them were not local. They have a certain ideal in mind. The same with extinction rebellion. (..) In the early days, you had a deal with the locals, saying that we have a pipeline in the field, something went wrong, we will fix it and that is ok. Now, everything that is local becomes national, international even.”</i></p>
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