
Public Corporate Engagement on Socially Sensitive Issues

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Abstract:

Purpose: This article examines exemplary ways of corporate involvement in supporting public commitment to the LGBT+ community, particularly in Poland, where such involvement is relatively new and still socially sensitive. It aims to show the possibilities of combining corporate involvement with business orientation.

Design/methodology/approach: The study uses content analysis of articles published in the national business press, focusing on communications published during Pride Month 2022 and 2023.

Findings: The study allowed the identification of different forms of public engagement with the LGBT+ community. These initiatives ranged from marketing campaigns and financial support to educational activities aimed at diversity and inclusivity.

Practical implications: The findings highlight the importance of corporate engagement in promoting and protecting the rights of LGBT+ people as a social group at risk of social exclusion. Businesses can play a crucial role in advocating for social change and fostering an inclusive environment. However, companies need to be prepared for potential backlash in socially polarised contexts such as in Poland.

Originality/value: This article contributes to the understanding of corporate engagement on socially sensitive issues. It provides an overview of corporate initiatives and their impact, offering valuable insights for companies and researchers on linking social and business goals using corporate social engagement.

Keywords: Public commitment, LGBT, diversity, social engagement.

JEL codes: M14, L21, D72.

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1. Introduction

Business reacts to what is happening in society. Business involvement is observed in matters that until now were the domain of non-governmental organizations or a part of public administration duties. One such is a set of activities undertaken for the benefit of the LGBT+ community.

This happens both at the internal level, mainly for employees, and externally as a public manifestation of support using corporate social responsibility tools or as part of the implementation of the commitments resulting from The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (United Nations, 2011). Presence in the public space may be also an attempt to show solidarity with this group especially in countries where the law regulations or social attitudes seems to be discriminatory, an expression of the organisation's social maturity, the result of internal pressure, and a desire to achieve business goals.

In countries where LGBT rights are respected, business support seems more manageable and more natural. Advocacy for LGBT+ remains a challenge where society and public authority do not favour this group, and the manifested views cause it to experience various forms of exclusion.

The necessity for business to demonstrate its commitment to protect the rights of LGBT+ people has been raised, among others, by the UN. In 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner published Standards of Conduct for Business (United Nations, 2017) focusing on tackling the discrimination of the abovementioned group. *Standards of Conduct for Business: Tackling discrimination against lesbian, gay, bi, trans, & intersex people* support business in meeting human rights obligations and help 'to facilitate the process of meeting their responsibility to respect the rights of LBGTI people' (United Nations, 2017).

Enterprises are assigned a large role in society. Reference in the UN standards to the role of business as an agent of change and the necessity of advocacy for LBGTI people increase its responsibility for taking part in the public discussion. Standard 5 refers to the obligation to respect human rights not only in organisations or their value chains but also in the public sphere.

The article's primary idea was to check the way companies operating in one of the CEE countries manifest their public support for the LGBT+ community. For this purpose, an analysis of articles published in the national economic press was carried out. Thanks to this, the list with forms of possible involvement was created.

The identified initiatives illustrate the scope of public support for the LGBT+ community, especially during the Pride Month and show the possible approaches to link business issues with social engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Corporate Engagement on Socially Sensitive Issues

One of the groups important, due to the still existing discriminatory situations, that should be considered in the context of public corporate commitment are LGBT+ people. They are important organisations' stakeholders and rightsholders. The situation of LGBT+ people in the world is very different, taking into account the level of social acceptance or fundamental rights (Poushter and Kent, 2020).

There are countries which even criminalise homosexual relations between consenting adults (United Nations, 2022). It results in many actions and interventions initiated by different sector representatives to negotiate and strengthen fundamental rights. As an influential sector, business is aware of the challenges faced by the LGBT+ community, replies to the need to counteract various forms of discrimination and ensures inclusive conditions for everybody.

Companies are trying to pay attention to meeting the needs of its employees who are LGBT+. The scope of undertaken activities is consistent with the first three standards of the Standards of Conduct for Business - the need to respect human rights (standard 1), eliminate discrimination (standard 2), support this group (standard 3).

The standards are designed to strengthen the voice of businesses on human rights. Thus, the private sector can help pave the way for millions more LGBT+ people to enjoy their rights - and live their lives with dignity, experiencing greater equality, acceptance and inclusion (Bross *et al.*, 2018).

The subject of business activities for LGBT+ people is usually undertaken in relation to the implementation of diversity policies and the creation of an inclusive culture and workplace where every person, regardless of their orientation, can pursue their professional lives and be part of the community (Köllen, 2016; Bell *et al.*, 2011; Webster *et al.*, 2018).

Inclusion and diversity in various aspects appear in the context of creating jobs through activities related to human resource management (Stavrou and Ierodiakonou, 2018; Jiraporn *et al.*, 2019; Webster *et al.*, 2018). In terms of human resources management, various approaches and concepts were used. Regardless of the theory adopted, all studies emphasised the importance of building relationships and places where everyone is respected.

Interestingly, the starting point in the analysed research was not the issue of human rights, but CSR or human resources management. The research that addressed LGBT+ issues underlined the impact of LGBT-friendly policies on innovation not only in companies (Kyaw *et al.*, 2021) but also in larger organisational structures

(Vu, 2022). In the context of the internal dimension, there is also an economic threat. Authors such as, for example, Pichler (2018), Fatmy (2021), Johnston and Malina (2008) or Shan and Zheng (2017), and others (Hossain *et al*, 2020) – in their considerations on the inclusion of LGBT+ people in workplaces – stress the benefits that the attitude of corporate openness brings to the business dimension.

Other studies put attention on the importance of companies' activities in unfavourable social circumstances and creating a culture of equality for the LGBT+ community now as well as many years ago despite much greater social resistance.

The case described by Heidi Reed can serve as an exemplary approach to the process of social change and business advocacy (Reed, 2017). These problems were also described in the context of the challenges and discriminatory practices that occur in the workplace (Resnick and Paz Galupo, 2019).

As shown in the literature, the main research interest lies in the internal relations. Much less space is devoted to the presence of demands for LGBT+ people submitted by businesses in the public sphere which is the idea of the fifth Standard. It seems that this area is still little known and little explored.

The link between the internal and external dimensions is the inclusion of LGBT+ topics in non-financial communication and reporting (Zhou, 2021; Parizek and Evangelinos, 2021). The abovementioned standards emphasise the necessity of preventing other human rights violations (standard 4) and act in the public sphere (standard 5) (Zhou, 2021; Parizek and Evangelinos, 2021). Acting in the public sphere is an issue of the author's interest.

Pride Month is an excellent time to explore the ways of business engagement. Many companies show that LGBT+ issues are noticed and cared for by them. Pride Parades are the culmination moment to “gain visibility, social, and self-acceptance, and demand for legal rights of the community.” (Tandon and Rao TSS, 2021). Businesses can support these events financially and use them to publicly express their approval of diversity and inclusivity.

The social role of business in enhancing fundamental changes in society seems particularly important in countries where governments are not friendly to minorities, the legal system does not provide adequate protection and the citizens are still in the process of accepting the differences and becoming more tolerant and inclusive.

In Poland, 47% of respondents believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society. This is a 7% increase compared to 2002, but it is a slow increase. Women are more supportive 53% than men 41% (Poushter and Kent, 2020). In many countries, those on the political right are less accepting of homosexuality than those on the left (Poushter and Kent, 2020). The quoted study used data from surveys conducted in 34 countries in 2019 with 38,426 respondents.

The list of possible violation is long which result in different social and individual challenges (Kampania Przeciw Homofobii..., 2021; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).

There may be many different factors that push companies to be active advocates for the rights of LGBT+ group. LGBT+ community is a large group of consumers who may bring concrete profits when companies take care of their need. The contribution of business to public commitment on this group may be also a response to the hostile policy of the public governments as a way of disagreement for the human rights violations.

The factors that has initiated the reaction of companies may also be the result of bottom-up initiatives and pressure from individual employees (Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021). Regardless of the business motivations for public engagement on socially sensitive issues, it is worth paying attention to how companies use their social influence through the way they communicate and combine business and social issues, without judging whether potential profits or public support a particular issue is more important.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Study Results

The commitment to the LGBT+ community in the Polish public debate is a relatively new phenomenon and its scope is still limited. Taking into account the fact that there is a strong polarisation in Polish society with regard to the acceptance of the LGBT+ group, the public engagement of the business sector, the way it's manifested and the way it integrates the planned actions into its communication seems interesting. Based on this assumption, the main research question is developed as follows:

What kind of activities related to public commitment to the LGBT+ community do companies manifest, especially during Pride Month?

The author used newspaper content analysis to collect data on the companies' involvement. The material for the analysis was obtained from the EMIS database. "EMIS operates in and reports on countries where high reward goes hand-in-hand with high risk. We bring you time-sensitive, hard-to-get, relevant news, research and analysis data, peer comparisons and more for over 197 emerging markets" (EMIS, 2023). The analysis covered 2022 and 2023. Texts were searched using the words Pride Month and LGBT and the reference to business activity (current or historical).

The study aimed to identify forms of public engagement with the LGBT+ community through corporate initiatives. The intention of the study was to create a

landscape of socially responsible actions aimed at solidarity with the group at high risk of discrimination and marginalization.

4. Research Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The analysis of economic press revealed that the companies use different forms of public engagement for LGBT+. Table 1 shows the identified initiatives and actions. The Table does not indicate a concrete company but the general type of involvement to show different possibilities.

Table 1. Examples of forms of public corporate engagement on LGBT+ community during the Pride Months in Poland.

Type of involvement: changing logo with pride colours
Short description: the simple action with a huge audience especially in social media and the Internet visible through special moment of the year.
Exemplary industry: jewellery, fashion
Type of involvement: selling goods with LBGT+ symbols
Short description: a form of marketing that uses the symbolism of the LGBT+ community to sell products. In addition, it can be combined with philanthropic activities, i.e. donating part of the profits from sales to organisations working for LGBT+ rights.
Exemplary industry: textile, fashion, retail
Type of involvement: showing heteronormative people in different life situations through advertising
Short description: Enable people to learn about the perspectives of LGBT+ people by showing them in real life situations and in their everyday activities as people from our community. The materials may also address difficult issues such as violence and discrimination. They can also refer to coming out and social reactions, paying attention to the dimension of the individual, his or her emotions and difficulties.
Exemplary industry: jewellery, fashion, media
Type of involvement: trainings of staff to increase sensitivity toward LGBT+ group
Short description: in this case, the aim is to train people associated with the company in diversity and inclusion. Training people who have direct contact with customers reduces the risk of discriminatory situations, supports the use of inclusive language and helps to create a true image of the LGBT+ community without stereotypes or prejudices.
Exemplary industry: jewellery
Type of involvement: social campaigns
Short description: the developed form of communication on various issues related to the problems or specificity of the LGBT+ community. Social campaigns could tell the story, shed light on something important, teach desired behaviours or approaches.
Exemplary industry: fashion, media, social media platforms
Type of involvement: Movies including educational materials and podcasts addressing LGBT+ issues
Short description: sharing film collections, podcasts and other educational materials that will allow to get to know the LGBT+ community, make more sensitive to other people and dispel myths that may arise around a group with which some part of the society do not

have direct day-to-day contact.
Exemplary industry: media, social media platforms

Source: Own elaboration based on the economic press analysis

As the content analysis of media reports shows, public engagement with the issues of heteronormative people is the domain of several key industries, such as fashion and jewellery, and media-related industries, including social media. These are usually large corporations, often with foreign capital, that use their reach to raise issues that may be difficult or sensitive in a particular community or country.

This type of public activism is related to marketing activities, as shown by the types of engagement identified. The organisation's willingness to engage is intended to support the visibility of people at risk of exclusion and discrimination, while demonstrating that they are an important group of customers. The more advanced the form of engagement, the greater the chance of showing different dimensions of LGBT+ issues.

4.2 Discussion

The types of public commitment presented illustrate different levels of engagement. The simplest acts of solidarity, such as chaining the colours of logos, increase the visibility of the LGBT+ community. It shows the respect of the companies and is relatively easy if approved by the managerial board. The marketing orientation was also identified. The use of marketing tools and communication channels to spread knowledge, inform about fundamental human rights issues or attract people to discover different perspectives is also practised by the described companies.

The marketing perspective of business involvement is also studied by other authors (Grilo, Vale, and Marques, 2023) and seems to be a common approach among businesses. The analysis carried out supports the general overview of the current state of corporate commitment to LGBT+, matching business orientation with the expectation of achieving social benefits during promotion and communication.

The more advanced way of involvement were visible in media companies which may use their business model cores to create the educational spaces and catch the attention of interested people.

The presented paper did not examine the motivation of involvement, but as noted in another study, treating the LGBT+ community as a stakeholder requiring public attention can also be the way to communicate the social responsibility of companies through diversified communication channels (Szyndlar and Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2019).

When it comes to corporate or brand activism, consumers increasingly expect brands to take a more active role in socio-political issues (Ahmad, 2024). They expect

brands not only to voice their opinions, but also to take concrete actions in line with their values.

However, this increased expectation is accompanied by a significant level of scepticism. Consumers often question the true motives behind a brand's involvement, suspecting that it may be driven by profit rather than genuine concern (Du *et al.*, 2010; Holt, 2002). To overcome this scepticism, brands must work hard to establish their authenticity and credibility (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

This involves creating messages that are clear and consistent with their actions, allowing brands to effectively address consumer concerns and demonstrate their commitment to socio-political issues. Building this trust is crucial for companies to maintain positive relationships with their stakeholders and to be seen as true advocates for the issues they support.

Companies can use their significant social influence to shape society's understanding of the challenges they face. When companies engage with the LGBT+ community, they are not only empowering and respecting the rights of this community, but also demonstrating their public interest in this sensitive stakeholder group. This engagement can be in the form of supporting specific initiatives or challenging unfavourable socio-political conditions.

If the country has poor legal protection of human rights, socially responsible companies are expected to respect human rights, which is particularly emphasised in the case of transnational corporations (TNCs) (Arnold, 2016). Certain expectations to address human rights abuses by TNCs often arise from their presence in countries where the social or political situation leads to limited protection.

The social responsibility of such companies implies the strengthening of protection mechanisms and compliance with international rules and regulations.

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

This study presents the results of a content analysis of newspapers aimed at describing the ways in which companies engage with LGBT+ issues. As shown, the types of engagement can vary from simple actions directly aimed at selling goods with symbols of the community to comprehensive social campaigns. All forms of engagement were strictly related to the core business.

The link between the developed initiative and the business value proposition can bring both opportunities and risks. The author's intention was to illustrate the business potential to support and increase the public visibility of the marginalised group of people.

The situation of the LGBT+ community in Poland is still very challenging. For this reason, business involvement can also be risky.

However, research has shown that companies choose to support activities aimed at the inclusion and protection of the rights of LGBT+ people consciously. This is particularly evident during Pride Month. Companies are involved not only on a marketing level - changing the colour of the flag or allocating part of the profits from sales to support organisations fighting for the rights of sexual minorities - but also on an educational level. The educational activities proposed by businesses help to reach a wide audience, raise awareness of diversity issues and improve knowledge and understanding in the society.

The media industry has been a leader in this area. There is also great value in publishing publications and materials that are available to anyone interested in learning more about the LGBT+ community. It seems that companies that decide to create public communication on such a sensitive issue are ready to take responsibility for possible social reactions. Being sensitive in business in Poland requires a lot of awareness and maturity to bear the consequences of possible market reactions.

The study provides a broad picture of the social engagement of companies open to public activism on LGBT+ issues. As with any study, it has some limitations in terms of the methodology used. The specific source of information was used, which means that information published in various media and company websites was not available.

However, this limitation can be used as an opportunity to conduct future large-scale studies, including the analysis of ESG reports in different types of companies, comparing the identified forms with other possible ways of public engagement.

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