

**Understanding the effect of external levers on issue selling strategies of CSR managers
of Dutch garment firms**

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Abstract

The current fast fashion industry has contributed to all sorts of environmental and social issues globally. To tackle these issues, fashion firms try to adapt CSR policies around various issues, which are not always successfully implemented. The growing literature on issue selling tries to bring understanding in how issues, such as CSR issues, are being sold internally within organizations. However, little attention has been paid to the external levers issue sellers can use to be successful in selling their issues. In this study, data collected from CSR managers of Dutch garment firms is being used to understand what the relation is between internal issue selling strategies and external levers in the form of governmental legislation, stakeholder pressure, shareholder activism, and focusing events. The findings of this study bring new insights about how these external levers are used by issue sellers and how they relate to internal strategies. Furthermore, the findings give suggestions on how issue sellers can adopt successful issue selling approaches.

Introduction

The rise of the 'fast fashion' business model has shaped the global supply chain of the garment industry (Bruce & Daly, 2006). This model, driven by Western lead firms that create

demand by generating constant fashion change (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015), brings concerns over labor rights violations, such as low wages and forms of physical and psychological abuse, as well as over environmental costs like the growth of water-intensive cotton and the release of dyes into local sources of water (Bick et al., 2018).

In their recent article, Locke and Samel (2018) stated that most different forms of regulation initiatives that are set in place to tackle these issues that come from the ‘fast fashion’ business model tend to focus on the production sites of the supply chains. Since it is in the setting of workplaces where most labor standards violations are occurring (Locke & Samel, 2018), it would make sense to lay the focus on making improvements here. However, the reality is that solely intervening at the production sites is an inadequate solution to the issues that to a great extent come from the fast fashion business model increasingly adopted by Western garment firms. This is the case, since many of the workplace problems that can be observed in global supply chains are the product of a set of policies and practices designed and implemented upstream by lead firms (Locke & Samel, 2018). Therefore, another stream of literature state that the causes of labor rights and environmental violations can be found, not on the production side, downstream in the supply chain, but more upstream, in the business model of Western lead firms (Amengual 2014; Locke et al. 2009; Locke & Samel, 2018).

Thus, it is imperative that lead firms implement new policies and practices in order to tackle social and environmental issues that arise in global supply chains due to the current fast fashion business model. However, changing the policies and practices, in a way that employees and the environment are being treated with more care is not facile. While most businesses are accepting the primary ideas of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that firms have some sort of responsibility for their actions towards society, the exact implementation of CSR ideas into organizational practice is highly contested (Aguilera et al., 2007; Wickert et al., 2016). Although there is broad general support for the notion of CSR, once employees of a firm need to implement CSR-related practices that requires to change their current routines and processes, getting from an issue to actions often becomes problematic (Bansal, 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to explore the ways in which ideas related to CSR can be transformed into concrete new responsibilities and tasks within a business.

This is where issue selling becomes interesting. Issue selling can be defined as how individuals within an organization try to obtain more intra-organizational support for a certain issue. Issues that are related to CSR are called social issues, which are issues that go beyond

the issue of profit maximization (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018), like gender equity or climate change. Literature has shown that the process of issue selling is highly important for organizations, since it has a great influence on the managerial agenda of an organization (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). However, when a social issue, like CSR issues, is on the managerial agenda, this does not mean that employees lower in the hierarchy of the organization are translating the managerial agenda into new practices (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). An actor that might have a particularly important role in making this transformation happen, is the CSR manager of a garment lead firm. Since, middle managers, like CSR managers, operate at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy, they have a strategic position making them key agents in driving social issue selling (Uyterhoeven, 1972). However, Wickert and De Bakker (2018) showed that CSR managers often struggle with ‘selling’ their social issues to internal ‘buyers’ of the issue. Meaning, CSR managers often experience difficulties with obtaining leverage within their firms for developing more sustainable policies and practices. To overcome these barriers, Wickert and De Bakker (2018) found that CSR managers try to implement all sorts of internal leverage strategies. Despite these internal strategies, social issue sellers still struggle to obtain internal leverage.

Another stream of literature, outside of the issue selling literature, has shown that there are also external factors that influence internal CSR implementation. These external levers come in the form of pressure from different stakeholders like NGOs, trade unions, and consumers (Donaghey et al., 2014; Schuessler et al., 2019); shareholder activism (Hoffman, 1996; Sjöström, 2008; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004); and governmental legislation (Buhmann, 2006; Shum & Yam, 2011; Steurer, 2010; Zhang et al., 2019). However, not much is known about what the effects are of these external levers on the internal leverage of issue sellers. Therefore, it would be relevant to dig deeper into processes and mechanisms that CSR managers as social issue sellers use to translate external levers into an increase of their internal leverage within their firms. Hence, in the present paper, I will investigate the current moves and techniques CSR managers use to sell issues within garment lead firms and the role of external factors on this process. This will be done by answering the following research question: *“How do external levers influence the selling strategies that CSR managers of garment lead firms use to obtain internal leverage for social issues?”*.

This research question will be answered by drawing on the literature on social issue selling (Sonenshein et al., 2014; Wickert & De Bakker, 2018) and by drawing on the literature on external factors that influence the process of translating CSR policies into practices (Buhmann, 2006; Donaghey et al., 2014; Hoffman, 1996; Schuessler et al., 2019; Sjöström,

2008; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004). The necessary data will be collected by conducting interviews with CSR managers from garment lead firms operating in the Dutch market.

This research is theoretically relevant because there is a research gap in our knowledge of how external factors can influence the issue-selling process. This research will try to discover how external levers influence internal issue selling strategies. Theorizing on this might give us a greater understanding of how issue sellers can successfully sell their issues.

This research is practically relevant because literature has shown that the issues that come from the global supply chains should be tackled upstream in the chain within the business model of lead firms (Amengual 2014; Locke et al. 2009; Locke and Samel, 2018). Issue selling is an important process in changing policies and practices of a firm, hence coming to a greater understanding of what makes this process successful might give CSR managers more tools to sell their issues and therefore improve CSR implementation.

The remainder of this article will have the following structure. First, important issue selling literature will be discussed, including the effects of external factors on internal CSR policies, leading to a research gap and a related research question. Thereafter the methods of this research will be discussed that are needed to answer the research question.

Theoretical background

In the coming chapter, first the key concepts will be defined. Next, an overview will be given about how garment industry issues are being tackled. Thereafter, the existing issue selling literature will be discussed which shows why understanding the intra-organizational issue-selling process is of importance for corporations. In addition, literature on the effect of external levers on CSR policies and practices will be reviewed. Finally, in this chapter a theoretical framework will be presented to answer the research question of this study.

How to tackle garment industry issues

All sorts of issues can be observed that have risen from the contemporary global supply chain of the garment industry (Bick et al., 2018). Attempts to tackle these issues have been made through both private and public regulation individually, as well as through an integration of both private and public regulation initiatives (Locke et al., 2013; Locke & Samel, 2018). Private regulatory initiatives range from codes of conduct unilaterally and voluntarily developed by multinationals describing with what standards suppliers should conduct their business (Gereffi et al. 2005; James et al., 2019), to management systems (such as ISO 26000 and Social Accountability 8000) that help companies to operate in a socially sustainable way

and to signal this to their stakeholders (Sartor et al., 2016). More recently, private regulatory initiatives in the form of collective industrial agreements between brands and global union federations, like the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, came to existence to improve worker safety (Bair et al., 2020). Public regulation initiatives range from national governmental to intergovernmental initiatives to improve labor standards via regulatory reform and enforcement. An example of an intergovernmental initiative is the Compact, launched by the European Union together with the Government of Bangladesh to improve labor rights, working conditions and factory safety in the garment industry in Bangladesh through reformed laws (Bair et al., 2020). A current development in the literature of global supply chain issues, is the suggestion of researchers to combine private and public interventions in order to effectively tackle these issues (Bartley, 2011; Kolben, 2007; Trubek & Trubek, 2007).

All these different forms of regulation and governance initiatives have a focus on the production sites of the supply chains (Locke & Samel, 2018). This, however, does not seem the right scope to tackle these issues. While many of the issues can be observed at the production sites, the root of the problem seems to lie upstream by lead firms (Locke & Samel, 2018). Western-led firms, which are retailers, designers, and trading companies that control and co-ordinate offshore garment production networks (Knutsen, 2003), have designed the supply chain in such a way that the dynamic consumer demand can be met. Meaning, lead firms have reorganized their supply chains in order to optimize efficiencies and minimize financial and reputational risks. Timely delivery of products has become the main priority, while labor costs and environmental responsibility are of lower priorities (Minnich & Maier, 2007). Lead firms can shape the garment supply chain to their hand, since suppliers are to a great extent dependent on these firms. According to Gereffi et al. (2005), this makes the garment supply chain a captive value chain, meaning that a great deal of intervention and control on the part of the lead firm is required for suppliers. Thus, causes of labor rights and environmental violations can be found, not on the production side, downstream in the supply chain, but more upstream, in the business model of Western lead firms (Amengual 2014; Locke et al. 2009; Locke & Samel, 2018). Therefore, garment firms' policies and practices need to change. This is where the process of issue selling becomes interesting.

Selling social issues

The body of literature that involves issue selling has been growing substantially over the last 40 years (Burgelman, 1983; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Floyd & Woolridge, 1992; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Howard-Grenville & Gapp, 2022). Dutton et al.

(2001:716) defined issue selling as: “*the process by which individuals affect others’ attention and understanding of the events, developments, and trends that have implications for organizational performance*”. Issue selling is a critical activity in the early stages of an organization’s decision-making process, since it influences which issues move to the organization’s agenda (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Issue selling literature mainly puts a focus on what sellers do (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001) and what the effectiveness of certain issue selling moves is (Howard-Grenville, 2007). This stream of literature showed that in the issue selling process there are six moves being used to advance the selling of issues. Namely, (1) asserting decision processes, (2) taking control, (3) appealing to commitments, (4) working within constraints, (5) providing data, and (6) offering explanations (Howard-Grenville, 2007). Sellers use these moves in different ways depending on the content and timing of the issue.

Furthermore, research has focused on what variables have an influence on the inclination to sell issues (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton & Ashford, 1993). In their article, Dutton and Ashford (1993) stated that the willingness to “go to bat” for an issue is determined by the values that the seller attach to an issue and the belief of the seller that the selling process will be successful, meaning that buyers will be open for the issue at hand. The latter will be more likely if the issue seller has a high self-perception of power within an organization. Moreover, Dutton and Ashford (1993?) added the insight that sellers will be more inclined to sell an issue if it has direct relevance to their functional areas. So, for example, a R&D manager is expected to be more willing to sell an issue that has implications for R&D instead of an issue that has to do with marketing.

An area within issue selling that has been given attention more recently, is the area of social issue selling (Sonenshein et al., 2014; Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). Social issues, like CSR issues, are those that go beyond the issue of profit maximization (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018), like gender equity or climate change. Understanding the process of how social issues are being sold is of significant importance, since multiple stakeholders urge firms to focus more on social, environmental, and ethical matters (Aguilera et al., 2007; Sonenshein et al., 2014). Nevertheless, these social issues are often not treated as central issues to an organization’s strategy (Sonenshein, 2006), because they are often not related to the firm’s direct relationship with primary stakeholders, whereas effective stakeholder managements leads to improved financial firm performance (Hillman & Keim, 2001). Moreover, social issues are not always facile to support for an individual. Literature has shown that supporting a social issue can have implications for someone’s career and personal live (Ashford et al.,

1998). Besides, making process in solving the issue can be very vague which might lessen the motivation to support the issue (Howard-Grenville, 2007). With this knowledge, it does not come as a surprise that individuals not always act on their desire to advocate for a certain social issue. With regards to this, Sonenshein et al. (2014) found that the context and self-evaluations matter for an individual to actually support a certain social issue. More specifically, the authors found that individuals with a self-affirmer profile, instead of self-critic or self-equivocator profiles, display the highest degree of issue-supportive behavior. The study of Sonenshein et al. (2014) helps to explain why it is not facile to be a social issue supporter and give guidance for strengthening individuals to become social issue supporters. It is of significant importance for firms to understand the barriers and drivers for individuals to sell a certain social issue within the organization. A greater understanding of this process might give insights in how firms can obtain more intra-organizational support for CSR-related practices which is necessary to put CSR issues into action (Maon et al., 2009).

CSR managers as social issue sellers

One important actor that is very much involved in the process of social issue-selling is the CSR manager (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). As ethical agents, they play an increasingly important role in shaping the way firms are implementing responsible policies and practices (Strand, 2013). These middle-managers, that also go by the name of sustainability managers, have the job to work on social issues that have been given strategic relevance by the top management of a firm. However, this does not mean that their ideas are always being bought by managers and employees lower in the organizational hierarchy (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018), which is the place where CSR strategies need to be implemented (Maon et al., 2009). The root of this problem seems to lay in the fact that CSR managers are not very often direct supervisors of the employees that should implement the CSR practices. This makes their position in the organization weak (Risi & Wickert, 2017). In addition, Daudigeos (2013) stated that staff professionals, like CSR managers, have little formal authority which gives them a marginal position in the hierarchy, making it difficult for these managers to change established organizational norms, beliefs, and routines. Besides, while some studies suggest an increasing openness for CSR issues among employees due to a search for meaningfulness in one's job (e.g. Lysova et al., 2019; Martela et al., 2018; Steger, 2019), other studies have shown that CSR implementation is hindered due to lack of motivation and sheer interest in social issues like CSR by employees (Wickert et al., 2016). The struggles CSR managers face in obtaining leverage for CSR issues is a barrier for the implementation of CSR policies and

practices. Thus, it is of importance that CSR managers know how to overcome this barrier and develop better leverage so they can sell their social issues within their firms more effectively.

Hence, CSR managers try to adapt certain strategies to be able to obtain leverage within their company. In their article, which builds further on the article of Howard-Grenville (2007) that discusses moves issue sellers make to sell their issues, Wickert and De Bakker (2018) give a description of how CSR managers use so called 'engagement strategies' to try to obtain more leverage for their social issues. These engagement strategies are used to build relationships with issue buyers which eventually unfold in the issue-selling process in which the issue seller hopes that ideas are being 'bought' by the buyer. The authors distinguished between the following strategies: accumulating internal influence, establishing proximity to social issues, and adapting to issue buyers' worldviews.

The first strategy, accumulating internal influence, entails that sellers of social issues try to find other actors who share their socially orientated character to support their social issues. This is done by offering issues in 'small pieces', since offering an issue in its whole can be overwhelming and threatening (Weick, 1984). In this way, CSR managers try to realize a series of modest victories by tackling a limited number of small problems one by one.

Secondly, establishing proximity to social issues can be distinguished between emotional and functional proximity. First, issue sellers try to establish emotional proximity by appealing to emotions that could be associated with the social issue in question. This increases intrinsic motivation to make a change with regards to the issue. In the second place, Wickert and De Bakker (2018) state that emotional proximity should be complemented with functional proximity. Meaning, the seller shows the buyer what the business relevance of a specific social issue is. How an actor in a certain function or department can concretely help with solving an issue is being explained to establish functional proximity. By establishing proximity a feeling of shared responsibility is being created.

The third strategy, adapting to issue buyers' worldviews, means triggering buyers to positively evaluate social issues and framing possible responses into the desired direction. Sellers do this by attaching certain values to the issues they aimed to sell and by speaking a language that aligns with the preferences of the buyer, verbally as well as non-verbally.

To conclude, Wickert and De Bakker (2018) identified three issue selling engagement strategies, which give form to a relational approach of selling issues to potential intra-organizational buyers. According to the scholars, the three strategies complement each other and should all be applied by CSR managers in order to obtain internal leverage for social

issues. A successful selling-process by CSR managers is of utmost importance for companies to be able to transform CSR issues into actions.

Although, the social-issue literature gives us insights in how CSR managers use a relational strategy to obtain internal leverage, less is known on how external levers can be relevant for issue sellers to sell their issues. This gap seems surprising given other streams of literature suggest a variety of external factors influencing how CSR is shaped and implemented within businesses.

External levers

The lack of research on external levers for social issue selling is surprising, given that extant literature outside issue selling has shown that external levers are indeed relevant for CSR engagement of firms (Buhmann, 2006; Hoffman, 1996; Schuessler et al., 2019; Sjöström, 2008). However, we do not yet know specifically how these external factors can be used in the process of social issue selling. These external levers come in different shapes and forms, which I will discuss briefly.

Firstly, Schuessler and colleagues (2019) stated that firms tend to change their policies in response to stakeholder pressure from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and trade unions. These institutions can try to mobilize consumers directly or through traditional and social media in order to put pressure on the policies of a firm (Donaghey et al., 2014). NGOs and trade unions seem to especially target large firms because they are more directly involved in governing global supply chains and therefore can be held accountable for labor and environmental standards violations (Bartley & Child 2014; Lakhani et al., 2013). The reaction of these large firms is to implement stricter forms of regulation, making stakeholder pressure an effective external lever to change CSR policies and practices of firms.

Secondly, literature has shown that focusing events can function as an external lever effecting internal CSR policies. Schuessler et al. (2019) found that a focusing event, which Birkland (1998) defined as a sudden, often harmful, highly publicized event that creates opportunities for advocacy groups to mobilize for organizational change in various forms. For example, Schuessler et al. (2019) stated that focusing events have led to the formation of new organizations that pressure firms to change their CSR policies or additional regulation is created due to a focusing event.

Another external lever that is described in literature to have an effect on internal CSR policies is shareholder activism (Hoffman, 1996; Sjöström, 2008; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004). Multiple studies showed insights of how shareholder activism, through for example

shareholder proposals, can shape the agenda of a corporation (Hoffman, 1996; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004). For instance, Sparkes and Cowton (2004) stated that investors that are taking a 'socially responsible investment' approach, influence corporations to take social and environmental responsibility. However, a nuance needs to be made here, since there is also a significant amount of scientists that are skeptic of the influence of shareholder activism on the policies of corporations (David et al., 2007; Haigh and Hazelton, 2004; Vandekerckhove et al., 2007). These studies show cases where shareholder activism lacked the power to create corporate change. Besides, not all garment lead firms are public companies and therefore do not have shareholders. Instead, these companies have one or more company owners. These owners might also lobby for changes within the company, as McNulty and Nordberg (2016) describe. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that in some cases shareholder activism can function as an external lever which shapes organizational policies, but this is very much dependent on the context and the type of firm.

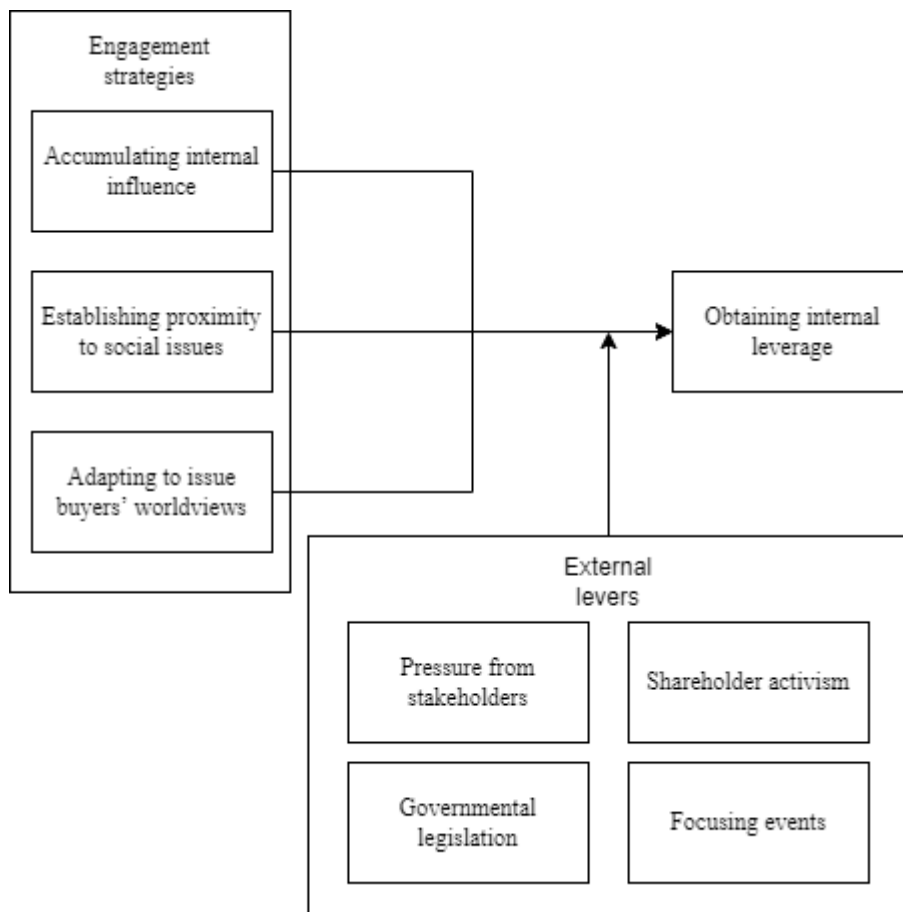
Finally, governments try to change corporate policies through legislation. Literature has shown that this is an effective external lever that is able to transform internal CSR policies of firms (Buhmann, 2006; Shum & Yam, 2011; Steurer, 2010; Zhang et al., 2019). Buhmann (2006) stated that, law in the abstract as well as in the statutory sense and as self-regulation is able to influence the substance, implementation and communication of CSR of companies. The author also stated that it is not always hard regulation that governments use to change CSR practices of companies. The EU, for instance, is increasingly more operating as a stakeholder showing expectations and making demands of corporate action for CSR. In addition, Shum and Yam (2011) demonstrated that managers will be more engaged in voluntary CSR activities to achieve social good when appropriate legal and ethical controls are in place. Thus, law can be used to correct CSR externalities of companies, making it another external lever that is able to transform internal CSR practices.

All in all, these studies show that there are several external factors that are able to influence whether or not firms engage in CSR as well as how CSR is shaped within a firm. In the literature of social issue selling not much attention has been given to how these factors affect the issue-selling process. It might be that issue sellers can develop or already have developed strategies to implement external levers into internal leverage for a social issue. This might be valuable knowledge for firms to be able to understand how important CSR issues can be sold among the base of the organization which will lead to smoother implementation of CSR issues into daily practices. Thus, understanding how issue sellers can use these external levers to sell their issues needs further exploration.

Theoretical framework

To bridge the research gap of the effects of external levers on obtaining internal leverage for CSR managers to sell social issues, the current study will answer the following research question: *“How do external levers influence the selling strategies that CSR managers of garment lead firms use to obtain internal leverage for social issues?”* . To answer this question, this study drew on the engagement strategies described by Wickert and De Bakker (2018). These strategies are used by sellers to establish a relationship with a potential buyer, making the issue selling-process more facile. The focal study explores how external levers are linked to these engagement strategies. For instance, they might complement or be a substitute for engagement strategies or they might change the engagement strategies in various ways. Drawing on studies outside of the issue selling literature, external levers that influence internal CSR management can be divided in governmental legislation (Buhmann, 2006; Shum & Yam, 2011; Steurer, 2010; Zhang et al., 2019), pressure from stakeholders like NGOs and media (Donaghey et al., 2014; Schuessler et al., 2019;), shareholder activism (Hoffman, 1996; Sjöström, 2008; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004), and focusing events (Schuessler et al., 2019). Figure 1 shows the conceptual model that depicts this relation between external levers and engagement strategies used to obtain internal leverage. Based on this conceptual model, the focal study seeks to understand if CSR managers indeed use the four different categories of external levers in their internal strategies to obtain internal leverage as well as how sellers can translate external factors to internal leverage.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of relationship between external levers and engagement strategies to obtain internal leverage.



Methods

In the following chapter the research design of this study will be discussed. Thereafter, I will discuss how the data was collected for this research. This is followed up by a description of how the data will be analyzed. Finally, the ethical aspects regarding the current study will be examined.

Research design

To tackle this research problem a qualitative research has been conducted, which drew on multiple semi-structured interviews with CSR managers of Dutch garment firms that were in the process of revising their core business practices towards becoming more responsible. Qualitative research was suited because in the current research a new theory is being developed instead of trying to reject a null hypothesis, for which quantitative research would have been more suited (Sofaer, 1999). Different CSR managers will probably make use of external levers in different ways, depending on their context. Qualitative research allowed to find patterns between these different situations from which overlapping themes can be derived (Sofaer, 1999). Besides, a qualitative research design allows for a greater understanding of the processes by which events and actions take place (Maxwell, 2008).

This study drew on semi-structured interviews with CSR managers. Interviews were suited to answer the above research question because they gave the opportunity to deepen the discussion (Bengtsson, 2016) with the CSR managers on how external levers can influence internal leverage. Besides, interviews gave the opportunity to come to a greater understanding of how CSR managers sell their issues with data from multiple companies instead of one which made it preferable to a case study. The interviews had a semi structural design, since this gave the flexibility to probe the interviewee for additional details if valuable information was being shared. On the other hand, it also had the benefits of a certain structure in the questions, which ensured that all the needed information was gathered to be able to draw conclusions.

This research follows a mix of both an inductive as a deductive approach. Identifying the three engagement strategies (Wickert and De Bakker, 2018) has a more deductive character because already existing theory will be examined. Theorizing on how the external levers influence the engagement strategies is a more inductive approach, since a new theory has to be developed.

Data collection

To collect the necessary data eight CSR managers of garment lead firms operating in the Dutch market have been interviewed. Interviewing these informants gave insights in what barriers CSR managers face in the issue selling process and how they try to overcome these barriers. The Netherlands has been selected as the research site because companies in this country are situated in a setting in which many stakeholders exercise pressure on businesses to implement CSR in multiple ways (Ingenbleek & Dentoni, 2016).

I started collecting data by searching for Dutch fashion companies on LinkedIn. For every Dutch company that was found, I would visit the website of the company to find information about their CSR practices. Multiple companies had published an annual sustainability report, others had a specific rubric on their website about sustainability or CSR in general. If there was nothing to find related to CSR for a certain company, it would be filtered out of the selection. After reading this information, which gave a first impression of how CSR is shaped within the company, I tried to find CSR managers through the LinkedIn pages of the Dutch fashion companies. Since managers in the CSR domain go by several job titles, I applied a categorization based on keywords in order to find the ones responsible for the shaping and implementation of CSR. The following keywords to identify CSR managers have been used: “CSR manager”, “Corporate social responsibility manager”, “Sustainability manager”, “Duurzaamheidsmanager”, and “ethics manager”. The interviewees had job titles like “head of sustainability”, “sustainability and responsibility manager”, and “sustainability lead”. With this approach circa 80 potential interviewees have been invited for an interview. The potential interviewees were employees of both SMEs (staff headcount <250 and yearly turnover <€50 million) and MNCs (staff headcount >250 and yearly turnover >€50 million). Only two CSR managers from MNCs agreed to be interviewed. The other six worked for a SME. Even though MNCs and SMEs are quite different in their nature, the companies of both types had CSR managers that functioned as middle managers who tried to sell social issues to colleagues. Table 1 shows the list of companies of which the CSR manager has been interviewed. Multiple interviewees requested anonymity of their company, therefore all companies have been given a number with which they can be identified.

Table 1: List of companies of which the CSR manager has been interviewed.

Company	Amount of employees	Yearly revenue (million €)
Company 1	10 – 25	2,5 – 5
Company 2	100 – 150	30 – 50
Company 3	10 – 25	2,5 – 5
Company 4	0 – 10	0 – 2,5
Company 5	50 – 75	5 – 10
Company 6	250 – 500	100 – 150
Company 7	50 – 75	5 – 10
Company 8	7.500 – 10.000	500 – 750

Next to the interviews with CSR managers, two CSR experts were interviewed. These experts also have been anonymized, by giving them the label CSR expert 1 and CSR expert 2. Both CSR experts have a consultancy role in the fashion industry, giving them an expertise in the barriers and possible solutions to implementing CSR within garment firms. Besides, CSR expert 1 owns a start-up that sells sustainable fashion and CSR expert 2 is the founder of a regenerative and organic cotton system. The experts complemented the knowledge that was gained from CSR managers by sharing insights from a more ‘big picture perspective’. With their expertise they could exchange insights on what are effective external tools for CSR managers to sell their issues.

All interviews have taken place through a videocall and took between 28 and 52 minutes. The audio of the interviews has been recorded in order to be able to transcribe the conversation.

The questions that were asked during the interviews with CSR managers were structured in different categories (see Appendix A for the full interview guideline). First of all, general questions were formulated about the job function of the respondent, how long he or she has been doing this and if the respondent works together in a team. This gave a general view of what the job of the interviewee entails. Secondly, questions were asked about what barriers the managers experience in selling their issues and how they try to overcome these barriers. In this section, information was being gathered on the internal strategies that interviewees used to obtain leverage for their issues. An example of a question is this category

is: “*Can you tell me a recent example of how you sold an issue to your colleagues, how did you try to convince them?*”.

Thereafter, questions were raised about external pressures that might influence how the interviewees might sell their issues. In this section, finding out which external levers are being used by CSR managers was the goal. The questions were divided in the four categories that were earlier distinguished in the theoretical framework. Namely, governmental legislation, external stakeholders, shareholders, and focusing events. An example question is: “*Are there NGOs that try to pressure your company to change CSR policies?*”. In the first three interviews, the question about the effect of governmental legislation on the CSR policies were operationalized by focusing on the Dutch Child Labor Due Diligence Law (van Kalmthout, 2021), since this is a recently adopted Dutch law. However, all three interviewees indicated that they were not familiar with the law so in further interviews questions about the influence of governmental legislation were more generalized to any law that might have an effect on CSR policies. Questions about external stakeholders were divided into questions about NGO pressure and media pressure. If the company of the interviewee had no public shareholders, questions were asked about the influence of pressure from the company owner. Questions about the focusing event were operationalized with the example of Rana Plaza, which was an example that all interviewees were familiar with. Furthermore, questions were raised to find out what the relationship is between the internal strategies and the external levers. For example: “*What factor is most relevant in your experience?*”. Finally, interviewees were given the opportunity to add things they felt were missing through the line of questioning.

The two CSR experts were in the beginning of the interview asked what they see as the barriers for companies to implement CSR practices. Several different topics came up after this question on which further questions were asked, making it a more unstructured interview. This allowed the CSR experts to speak about the topics they found important with regards to the social issue selling process in garment firms. Hereafter, the same questions about external pressures and levers that were asked to the CSR managers were asked to the experts.

Data analysis

To identify the engagement strategies, a deductive approach has been followed. An inductive approach was used to construct theoretical categories and to find themes that emerged from the data collection on external levers. I have followed the methodology described by Gioia et al. (2013). The authors of this methodology designed it in such a way that it enables both

creative imagination and systematic rigor in conducting qualitative research, which was relevant to answer the research question because creativity was needed to come to new theories in a relatively uninvestigated area of issue selling. This creative imagination was accompanied by systematic rigor which is necessary in research to come to valuable conclusions, instead of merely cherry-picking some quotes from CSR managers and formulating a theory from them. The collected data was analyzed using ATLAS.ti as a tool.

The data analysis was started by reading the different transcripts of the CSR managers multiple times. After this reading process, the internal strategies of CSR managers were labelled with the same first order concepts labels as used by Wickert and De Bakker (2018). These were abstracted in the second order concepts described by the authors, which eventually could be aggregated to the three engagement strategies (Accumulate internal influence, Establish proximity, and Adapt to worldviews). The complete code tree used by these authors can be seen in figure 2.

Hereafter, the external pressures and levers were coded. Firstly, first order codes have been identified, which are codes that have a marginally higher abstraction level than the actual data itself (Gioia et al., 2013). *Using law to warn* and *Collaborating with NGO* are two examples of first order codes. From these first order codes, second order themes, like *Law being used as a threat* or *NGO being used as a resource*, could be identified which eventually lead to aggregate dimensions, like *Governmental legislation as external lever*. The same procedure was followed for coding the relationship between the engagement strategies and external levers. The complete code tree that was formed through this process can be seen in figure 3.

Ethical aspects

In this part I will indicate how I made sure that my research complies with state of the art research ethics. First of all, since I am the only one that worked on this research, there is no question who gets credit for authorship. Therefore, potential disagreements about who should get credit for this study are irrelevant. Secondly, during the study I did not have multiple roles. My only role was as a student writing his master thesis. Thirdly, I made sure that the interviewees in my study were well informed about their part in the research. They gave consent to the purpose of the research and the expected duration. Beforehand, their anonymity was guaranteed and participants were given the incentive for participation in the form of receiving the results of the study. All this was made clear in the invitation message for participating in the interview. Fourthly, I made sure that the confidentiality and privacy of the

informants was kept. This was done by anonymizing their names and companies. Moreover, no contact information was shared of the participants. Finally, I read the APA's Ethics Code before conducting the research. This made me more aware of my ethical obligations.

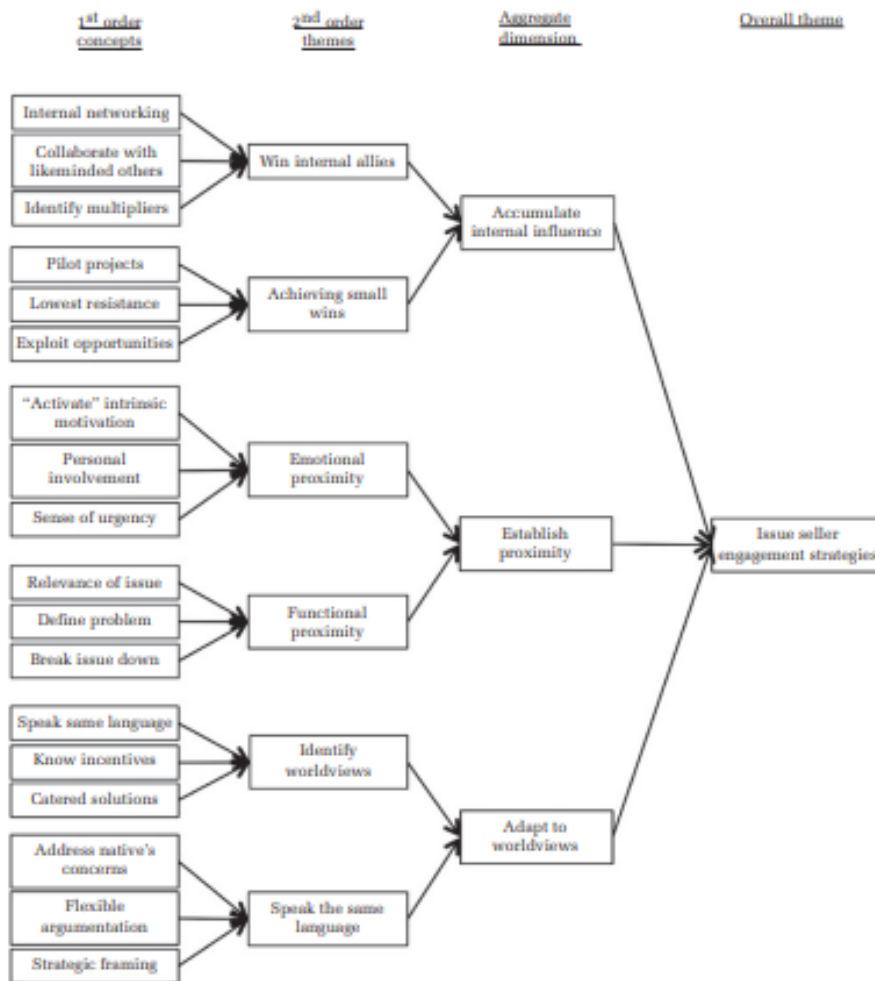
Results

The findings of this study offer a greater understanding of the relationship between internal strategies and external levers in social issue selling. Firstly, the three engagement strategies have been identified. The data suggest that the CSR managers from Dutch garment firms try to adopt these internal strategies. Secondly, findings about external levers will be presented to show what tools issue sellers can gather to help them selling their issues. These levers seem to be an aid in adopting the internal strategies, and therefore help social issue sellers to be successful in the selling process. In addition, how these external levers influence internal selling strategies will be discussed per lever. I will outline in more detail how that is done below.

Issue seller engagement strategies

First of all, a short overview will be given of the presence of the three engagement strategies described by Wickert and De Bakker (2018) in the data. All three engagement strategies seem to be identifiable from the interviews that were held with CSR managers. Briefly showing how these strategies occur in the data might make it more facile to understand how external levers have an influence on these internal strategies. The findings are structured in the same as depicted in the code tree of Wickert and De Bakker (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Code tree issue seller internal engagement strategies (Wickert and De Bakker, 2018).



Accumulate internal influence

Wickert and De Bakker (2018) identified two interrelated approaches that issue sellers use to accumulate internal influence. First of all, social issue sellers try to *win internal allies*. The informants of this study emphasized the importance of this. Multiple CSR managers mentioned that they try to identify who they could collaborate with to make the issue selling process successful. About this identifying process, the CSR manager of company 5 said: *Look, that purchasing department is perhaps the most inclined to think along about CSR. They do understand that. And they also recognize that it has to be better. Being good at collaborating with others was one of the most mentioned skill that the respondents named.* The CSR manager of company 3 gave shape to this collaborating with colleagues through a workgroup:

That is one of the reasons why we have set up a work group that includes various disciplines. And then we have a meeting with agenda items, things we want to tackle.

And those can be picked up from that discipline, yes, for the next meeting again to give feedback.

In addition, CSR expert 2 expressed the importance of being able to identify the right listeners to your issues. In this way, issue sellers can win increasingly more internal allies which will lead to an accumulation of internal influence.

Secondly, a few informants mentioned that they try to accumulate internal influence by *achieving small wins*. Managers do this by launching projects and other new initiatives in a subtle manner. As the CSR manager of company 5 stated:

Yes guts .. eh dare you have to dare to take up initiatives without fully knowing whether this is going to be the case. So he is now going to work together with that one tool. that app. Of which we are not quite sure whether to become him or not. Sometimes you just have to try. See how far you get with that.

Achieving small wins is also accomplished by recognizing an opportunity and exploiting it to the fullest. The CSR manager of company 8 illustrated this as follows:

We had a new director then, who was more like hey I want you to take that responsibility to further develop that policy. That was really a momentum for us of wanting to become more transparent and we want to take that next step

In conclusion, multiple respondents seem to approach social issue selling with a step by step strategy to increasingly accumulate internal influence. Therefore, the findings show that the CSR managers from Dutch garment firms seem to adopt the first engagement strategy described by Wickert and De Bakker (2018).

Establish proximity

The findings of this study show that the respondents also made use of the strategy to establish proximity to social issues. Just as Wickert and De Bakker identified in their study, the issue sellers draw on both an emotional and a functional appeal to establish this proximity. Firstly, establishing *emotional proximity* was done in multiple ways. The respondents mentioned that they try to activate intrinsic motivation at issue buyers, which can be approached in multiple ways. For example, the CSR manager of company 2 did this by updating and training colleagues in certain CSR topics:

And in addition, ...I have given training to all, many colleagues, we provide internal training courses for various subjects. Because CSR is going to be quite sustainable, circularity is going to innovate quite quickly, and there is always something new. To keep them well informed about new developments. So before that I did give

presentations and I also give an update once in the quarter, unless it is earlier, about the latest status of the developments. So in this way I keep them responsible beyond the management, ehh well, I also give them more knowledge, in the end that must also come from themselves.

Similarly, CSR expert 1 explained that in the issue selling process it is effective to try to activate intrinsic motivation. He illustrated this approach in the following way:

Yes, also express it in a different way to them. I think sometimes it's just tactical to look hey what argument someone is prone to to get the change done. ...Mainly because ehh for others it is honesty, for others it is taking good care of the earth, for others it is the fact that all our products are vegan. It's just completely different what kind of person that is. But they are all people who want to make something better of the world.

Moreover, the respondents mentioned that they try to involve the buyers personally in order to establish *emotional proximity*. About this the CSR manager of company 3 said: *...for the rest it is important that you engage the rest of the staff. Yes, because they also come up with other points from their perspective that I hadn't come up with myself.*

Secondly, many informants explained that they adapt a functional approach to establish proximity to social issues. This means that the CSR managers explained to different departments what the implementation of a certain issue would entail for them. This makes it concrete for employees what they can expect when 'buying' a social issue, instead of a vague prospect. The CSR manager of company 2 explained her approach as follows:

So then I lobbied all these different departments. Purchasing picked it up so I went to see what numbers they need. Looked at the sales for what price they need. In product development, we looked at what the products are always. And that's actually how we started this project. And in the beginning it is also important that you include all departments in the story.

Next to breaking the issue down for the different departments. Respondents explained that they established *functional proximity* by defining the problem. As the CSR manager of company 7 stated:

Yes the interpretation but you also have to keep repeating the story. Also because people ehh ehmm the because colleagues are not always informed, that is my job to inform people.

The data suggests that various informants adopt the strategy to establish proximity to social issues and, thus, adopt the second engagement strategy described by Wickert and De

Bakker (2018). Both appealing to the emotional and functional sides of a social issue helps issue sellers to successfully sell their issues.

Adapt to worldviews

The third engagement strategy described by Wickert and De Bakker (2018) is adapting to issue buyers' worldview. This strategy can be divided into two different approaches, *identifying worldviews* and *speaking the same language* as issue buyers. The findings suggest that the CSR managers from Dutch garment firms use these approaches to sell their issues. Firstly, the informants described that they tap into the incentives of the buyers and offer them catered solutions. This shows that the respondents have identified the worldviews of the issue buyers. The CSR manager of company 1 described this tapping into incentives as follows:

I convince by initially researching it because basically I think that all organizations and initiatives are very similar. But in the end, everyone chooses their own focus. So I'm going to research it first, I'm going to try to estimate the importance of us, and that importance for us means the importance for our customers in relation to our colleagues and then I'm going to bring it out on the stage.

The CSR manager of company 6 briefly explained how the approach of catered solutions is executed: *So instead of 1 solution, I have now put together a number of solutions as a kind of puzzle. So that the investment is higher, but the solution is better.* This was expressed by the CSR manager of company 8 in a similar manner: *You should actually submit as many ready-made proposals as possible where you have thought of everything.*

Secondly, the informants explained that they try to *speak the same language* as their colleagues in order to adapt to their worldviews. They mainly did this by strategically framing their social issues. In this way, buyers would tend to evaluate the social issues more positively. The CSR manager of company 7 illustrated this approach as follows:

So sometimes it is more about psychology than really transferring knowledge. So it's about how you take it ehh.. We don't want ehh.. clearly we're not just doing it for the green idea. You should also try to convey that it is also a wise choice. Not necessarily that we keep it there, but that ehh.. not necessarily going to cost us money.

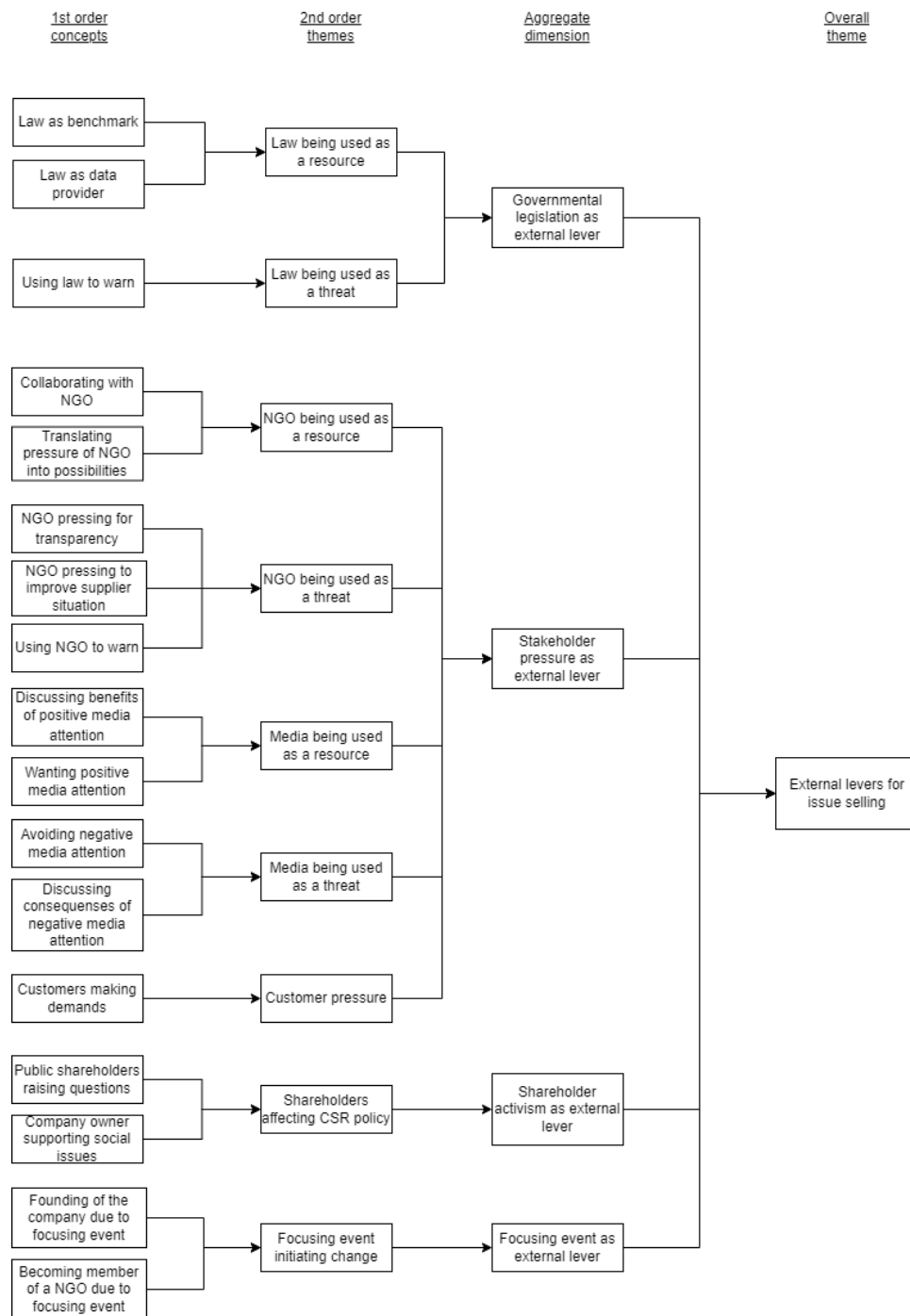
In sum, the findings suggest that the informants from Dutch garment firms try to adapt the third approach described by Wickert and De Bakker (2018). They try to adapt to issue buyers *worldviews* by on the one hand *identifying* them and on the other hand *speak the same language* as issue buyers.

Taking this all together, the data implies that the internal strategies to obtain internal leverage described by Wickert and De Bakker (2018) are all being used by the CSR managers of Dutch garment firms. Knowing that these are present in the data, I will now present what the relationship is between these engagement strategies and external levers that issue sellers come across in their issue selling process.

External levers for issue selling

In this part I will describe how external levers influence the previous identified engagement strategies. CSR managers come across all sorts of external levers which can be categorized in governmental legislation, stakeholder pressure, shareholder activism, and focusing events. It was apparent from the data that almost all levers were used as a threat on the one hand and a resource on the other. In other words, CSR managers chose to both use external levers to frame the positive side of buying an issue as well as the negative consequences if an issue was not bought. Per category, I will show how these levers were described by the informants and in how it strengthens their internal strategies. A code tree has been inducted that visualizes the themes that could be identified from the data (see figure 3). The following subchapter part is structured in accordance to the code tree.

Figure 3: Code tree issue seller external lever strategies.



Governmental legislation

First, I describe the way governmental legislation is an external lever for CSR managers. Two different approaches of using governmental legislation as a lever should be distinguished, namely by law being a resource and law being a threat. Both approaches seem to be an aid for different internal strategies CSR managers use to sell their issues.

Law being used as a resource. The respondents mentioned two related ways in which they could use governmental legislation as an external lever in the form of a resource for the company. Namely, laws can serve as a *benchmark* of what minimum level certain CSR practices should have and laws can lead to a CSR manager obtaining more *data*. First, CSR managers use the law as a concrete goal their company can aim for. The CSR manager of company 2 stated that the coming of a new law gives their company an idea of what they should aim for:

The UPV is coming, I don't know if you know it. The extended producer responsibility, which means that if you put the clothing on the market, you also have to take it back. These are laws that have arisen due to the interests of the sector. So yes, we do see that as a target.

This minimum level they have to obtain gives an idea to fellow employees what they are working on which is a motivation to put a certain CSR issue into practice. This gives CSR manager aid in establishing *functional proximity*, which is part of one of the engagement strategies identified by Wickert and De Bakker (2018). The CSR manager of company 3 said the following about the effect of concrete goals on colleagues:

And if you have some kind of skeleton, from okay we think it's important to improve sustainable materials every season. For example, we are now at 40% and we want to have that at 50% by the end of next year, and 60% the year after. I just say something. That gives very transparent lines, then you just know what you're working on. Then it has more purpose so to speak.

Second, CSR managers can use the law as an external lever to get their hands on more *data* that they can use to build business cases on, which give insights in what the implementation of a certain CSR policy is going to mean financially for the company. The development of business cases is a way of *speaking the same language* as fellow managers. In this way, CSR managers use the engagement strategy of adapting to worldviews (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). The CSR manager of company 6 reflected on the provision of *data* by laws in the following way:

...this ensures that there is a basic rule which gives more data. So what you often see when you write such a business case, is that data is usually not available. ...so yeah i think this law and regulation definitely wakes people up in the commercial world. ...I think that ummm yes that companies change because of this, that it is easier to build certain cases because there is data available.

Approaching social issue selling with the resources that laws bring seems to be an external lever that enable CSR managers to establish a greater sense of proximity to social issues and to be able to adapt better to issue buyers' wordviews. However, this was not the main way in which governmental legislation was used as an external lever. Almost all interviewees explained that in their social issue selling process they used governmental legislation to accentuate the consequences of not giving the right attention to a social issue.

Law being used as a threat. Informants reported that their employees, and mostly those in management positions, are quite careful in complying to the law. By *warning issue buyers* of the consequences of breaking the law by not giving the right attention to a certain social issue, governmental legislation is used by the respondents as a powerful tool to sell their issues. On the question if the interviewee thinks or notices that legislation helps to convince colleagues of the importance of a certain issue, the CSR manager of company 5 gave the following resolute answer:

Yes absolutely. Absolute! If one is sensitive to something, it is for legal obligation.

This of course depends on what that legal obligation entails in concrete terms. Does it depend on a sanction or is it a bit of an open standard. But they are very sensitive to that. ...So yes laws are very powerful. ...I will also use that new law that is coming as a fighting weapon.

Similarly, the CSR manager of company 6 answered on the same question:

Let me put it this way. I always try first: I think this is good for these and these reasons, and if it doesn't work then I'm going to throw in the risks. So I always try it first in a positive way and if it really doesn't work out then yes I kick the door open with that.

In addition, the CSR manager of company 7 illustrated that the pressure of the government can be used to convince buyers of the importance of a social issue. By mentioning this pressure the informant was able to address the concerns of the issue buyers:

...but you enter into that conversation with each other because ehh the government is already discussing it. And is already asking for it. ...So that discussion is certainly internally present. Is this all necessary? Aren't we ahead of everyone? The Netherlands is already leading the way. Questions are asked about this. So you have that discussion.

These informants illustrate how they use governmental legislation as a *warning tool* to show the relevance of an issue and addressing the incentives of buyers. In this way,

governmental legislation again helps issue sellers with the engagement strategies to establish proximity to social issues and to adapt to issue buyers' worldviews.

However, a nuance should be made here. Even though for many of the respondents governmental legislation is a useful external lever, not all interviewees use this lever. This is due to the fact that the law is often not ambitious enough. Meaning that the current CSR policies of their companies are often far more extended than new laws are describing. The CSR manager of company 1 said the following about this:

There is a difference in that, but basically it has been a issue in our industry for a long time already, something that is just not accepted. So this ehh law, new law does not have a lot of impact for our industry in my opinion.

On that same note, CSR expert 2 expressed indifference about the use of laws to convince others of the importance of a certain issue. This because it does not appeal to the core problem, but rather it changes something in the margin of a social issue. The real solution to social issues should be found in creating intrinsic motivation at colleagues:

I do not like laws, I said that before. No, you know it is a necessary evil because otherwise people will not move. But where we should go... I think we must all intrinsically understand and want things to be different.

In sum, even though not all respondents use governmental legislation as an external lever, it seems to be an effective tool that CSR managers can use in their issue sellign process. In the eyes of CSR expert 1 it might even be the most effective external lever a social issue seller might use to sell issues. On the question what CSR expert 1 thinks is the most effective external lever the answer was: *I think legislation is the most essential. Because, ehh, because legislation is a push to really do something.* In relation to the engagement strategies of Wickert and De Bakker (2018), governmental legislation is an external lever that helps issue sellers to establish proximity to social issues and to adapt to issue buyers' worldviews, both by being a resource for CSR managers as by being a means to warn with.

Stakeholder pressure

Stakeholder pressure can come from all sorts of stakeholders. The informants identified three main ones, namely NGOs, media, and customers. NGOs and media can both be used as an external lever in two ways, by *being a resource* and by *being a threat*. All pressures described in these part are levers for CSR managers that help strengthen their internal engagement strategies.

NGO being used as a resource. The interviewees discussed two different ways in which NGOs are a positive resource for them. First of all, CSR managers try to *work together with NGOs* to come to new creative ideas to sell their social issues. The CSR manager of company 5 stated the following:

So you also have to have some kind of creativity to see how we are going to approach that. Who am I going to work with? Maybe we can learn from someone else. Maybe approach a local NGO. So you have to think out of the box. Looking for that contact, calling and saying we can brain storm a little.

In a similar way, the CSR manager of company 8 expressed the importance of *working together with NGOs*: *You just can't do a lot of things alone, so you really have to have the will to partner up or brand with other retailers. Or with partnerships such as Fair Wear.* This *collaboration with NGOs* can help CSR managers in coming to solutions for their social issues that they can later in the selling process cater to potential issue buyers. Often mentioned NGOs that CSR managers work together with are The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and Fair Wear.

Secondly, CSR managers use the pressure of NGOs to make their issue selling process successful. They do this by directly *translating the pressure* to the situation of their company. This gives concrete steps for the company to take instead of vague pressure. Like mentioned before, giving issue buyers concrete steps to bring an issue into action is an effective way to establish proximity to a social issue. On the question how the interviewee uses the pressure of NGOs in the selling process, the CSR manager of company 7 answered:

So I mention the benefits for us and what the work is. I think you have to translate it into the concept of what you do, hang on your collection or hang on a vision of the future. It still lacks a little bit of strategy here. And actually a plan of approach that has changed a lot lately because there are many developments. You get to know a collection and get to know a company. And you also adjust it a bit to what fits here. You can set the bar very high.. but no, that doesn't help.

The data of this study shows that social issue sellers felt that NGOs can be used as a resource in the issue selling process by *working together* with them and *translating their pressures and guidelines into concrete steps* for the company to take. However, the respondents seemed to use the NGO pressure even more as a threat to successful sell issues.

NGO being used as a threat. According to the interviewees, NGOs put all sorts of pressures on garment firms to change their policies. These pressures can be divided into *pressing for transparency* about how and with who the garment firm is conducting its

business with and in *pressing to improve the working situation* of their suppliers. In a conversation about this ‘threatening’ of NGOs the question was raised to the CSR manager of company 2 if this pressure ensures that there is internally more room to implement or expand CSR issues. The following was answered: *Well I would rather say that companies see the societal importance of why there needs to be a CSR department. I think that is the main consequence.* This is an indication that NGOs help CSR managers to convince their colleagues of the relevance of their work and therefore their issues. In addition, multiple respondents stated that they can use the pressure of NGOs to warn coworkers of the consequences of not following the demands of NGOs. The CSR manager of company 3 illustrated this as follows:

Because of course I can say that we really have to do this, this is number one priority and it has to be done tomorrow, but of course it weighs even more if an organization that we want to join, if they say if you don't do it next week then this has to be removed from the site. Because then you get that consequence. I think I also have the persuasiveness to say yes it really has to be now, but I think it is even stronger if such an organization takes a look at it. It's actually a stick behind the door.

Similarly, the CSR manager of company 6 stated that NGOs have an important role in making the selling process of social issues successful: *So if you look at NGOs than you see that they have an important voice in making or breaking it so to say.*

The data suggests that *threatening with the pressures of NGOs* is an effective external lever that issue sellers can use. Using this lever makes issue buyers aware of certain benefits of being on the right foot with NGOs. Tapping into these incentives for issue buyers can help issue sellers with implementing the engagement strategy of adapting to the buyers’ worldview.

Media being used as a resource. The media, in all its various forms, are according to the respondents an effective tool to convince other managers and employees to develop CSR policies. The CSR manager of company 5 put emphasize on how sensitive companies are for positive media attention: *We are sensitive to the fact that other brands sometimes do get positive media attention about the area of CSR and we do not.* Moreover, by *discussing the benefits of the positive media attention* that comes with implementing a certain CSR practice this manager tries to sell issues:

Like, for example, I say lets collaborate with that organization so we will be the first in the Netherlands that works together with them and than we can exploit that in the

media. That will cost 10.000 euros but than you really have something. A conversation like that, there are my managers being sensitive to.

In other words, by *strategically framing* the pressure of the media, media becomes an external lever to *speak the same language* and therefore adapt to the issue buyers' worldview.

However, just as for pressure from NGOs, the informants seem to prefer to use media pressure as a threat to successfully sell their issues.

Media being used as a threat. Several informants mentioned using the prospect of negative media attention as a tool in the issue selling process. Many CSR managers indicated that their company wants to *avoid negative media attention* at all costs, making it a driver to pay more attention to CSR issues for the company. The CSR manager of company 5 expressed the fear for negative media attention in the following way:

Yes I think that media... you have negative and positive media. So the negative media, as with Rana Plaza, you really don't want to experience that there is media attention and your clothes are laying there.

Similarly, the CSR manager of company 6 explained that media management becomes increasingly more important for businesses:

But media and social media have also been really bad lately. There are many influencers who shame certain companies. Think about Shell. There is media that writes articles about what really killed certain companies and their sustainability strategy because it is not ambitious enough. So I think media and social media are becoming more and more important to manage.

In addition, CSR expert 1 showed that negative media attention really can have detrimental effects for organizations. He showed this by illustrating the effect of negative media attention towards quality certifications:

And that is also what is reinforced by the media because they indicate hey a quality mark there is still a lot going wrong. ...I also think in it what happens with critical media attention to certain quality marks that things have to be improved, it also just ensures that quality marks as a whole are pulled down that actually do. have a good impact.

This shows what negative media attention can do with the perception of how responsible a certain institution or company is. Like the CSR managers explained, their companies are cautious to not fall in a bad daylight in the media when it comes to their CSR agenda. CSR managers could use this as an external lever by *strategically framing* the consequences of not

buying certain social issues. Related to this, informants mentioned that the pressure of customers is lever they can use to *frame social issues strategically*.

Customer pressure. Multiple respondents mentioned that sometimes customers put pressure on their company to change their CSR policies. If *customers demand* certain developments on the CSR agenda than companies tend to follow these demands. As the CSR manager of company 1 answered on the question what the most relevant external factor for the shaping of CSR is:

For us as an organization, it is what is relevant for our customers. For us it is the end consumer. Our end customer is actually determinative for what we arrange and how we arrange it. So we move with the customer.

In addition, informants showed that this pressure from customers can sometimes indirectly come from governmental legislation. Since they have to comply to certain rules they put pressure on garment firms to implement certain policies. This came to light when the CSR manager of company 7 was asked the following:

Question: Do you ever use pressure from the government, new laws to promote your ideas, to demonstrate the importance of your issues?

Answer: Yes absolutely...for example, a construction company that does not get a job if it does not meet certain conditions in terms of sustainability or social conditions. So that pressure also comes from our customers. Hey, that law comes back to us through our customers. And that certainly helps, that it is alive in the market. So there are regulations that are sometimes quite progressive. Hey, but we also use that pressure from the law and that pressure from customers.

So, the pressure of customers help CSR managers to *frame issues strategically* and to *tap into incentives*. In this way, customer pressure becomes an external lever to help issue sellers in adapting to issue buyers' worldviews.

In sum, stakeholder pressure on the CSR agenda of garment firms comes in all sorts of forms. Informants identified pressure from NGOs, the media, and from customers. These pressures can be used as an effective tool in the issue selling process. They complement the engagement strategies of Wickert and De Bakker (2018) in multiple ways. They mainly help issue sellers to adapt to worldviews of issue buyers, but also to establish proximity to social issues.

Shareholder activism

Shareholder activism was identified in different forms by respondents. This was due to the fact that from the eight companies only one has public shareholders. All other companies have one major shareholder, the company owner who often is also the founder of the company. Extant literature has mainly looked at how public shareholders are an external lever to CSR policies and practices, however the use of the support of company owners is a relatively undiscovered concept.

Shareholders affecting CSR policy. The CSR manager from the one company with public shareholders, company 6, explained that shareholders do affect the CSR policies of the company in a way. The manager stated that the public shareholders do not directly bring social ideas or issues on the table, but they do pressure the CSR policies by *asking questions* about it:

They do not directly say it has to be more sustainable but they do raise issues. How are you going to handle certain things? Do you have this all in place, so to say? Like for example a code of conduct. Can you publish that on your website?

By raising these questions, some pressure is put on the company to act. The CSR manager of company 6 indicated that in the issue selling process this pressure can be used as a ‘weighting factor’, but it does not suddenly open all the doors.

Secondly, the interviewees stated that the *support from the company owner* has a massive influence on the success of their issue selling processes in their SME. Especially because often the company owners of these SMEs have an intrinsic motivation to improve CSR policies. The CSR manager of company 3 said the following about this:

The benefit of my company is, that the designer, is the founder, and the creative director, so she is so on board. So for her, the restriction you have (due to implementing a certain CSR issue) is not an issue.

Similarly, the CSR manager of company 2 illustrated how the company owner of the company *supports* the respondents social issues, namely by lobbying for them internally:

Firstly my manager was the general director and now he is the company owner. He stands outside of the company. But he just manages me. And he really has an intrinsic motivation to implement circularity, so I am alone but he pick projects up together with me and he lobbies for it as well.

The data shows that CSR managers use the *support from their company owners* to create leverage within the company. The CSR manager of company 5 showed the convenience of the support of the company owner:

Look he wants, it is a little bit a man who wants to be the best in everything. And he also wants to be the best in CSR. So that comes in handy for me. Mostly to shine with to the outside.

In addition, CSR expert 1 stated that because he is the owner of his company he can force his employees to act on social issues. This reinforces the importance for CSR managers to get company owners on their side:

Yes I think it makes a difference that I can force it. Yeah that sounds so negative. But I am eventually the one that makes the decisions, as well in these areas. And I think that for a CSR manager or for me it is important to get the leadership involved in this in the first instance.

By collaborating with the company owner, CSR managers showed to have an important internal ally to accumulate internal influence with. In these SMEs, the company owner seems in a position with significant internal leverage to change the business. Therefore, using the *owners' support* seems a powerful lever for issue sellers to use.

In sum, the data suggests that both *public shareholders* and *company owners* can be used as an external lever by issue sellers to sell their issues. The findings especially point to the fact that support from company owners helps with accumulating internal influence leading to more internal leverage for social issues.

Focusing events

The last external lever the interviewees mentioned is a focusing event. Although focusing events do have an effect on the CSR policies of garment firms, the informants did not mention using this lever to sell their social issues.

Focusing event initiating change. Various informants mentioned that focusing events seem to inspire a change in garment companies. Multiple CSR managers stated that focusing events initiated their companies to *work together with a NGO*. For example, the CSR manager of company 2 stated:

I think in textile fashion, working clothes, that Rana Plaza has really been a turning point. Because that is why the covenant on sustainable clothing and textiles was set up in 2016. And that has now ended, but that was actually a consequence of that. And we were also signatories to it. Since the first year.

In a similar way, the CSR manager of company 1 said:

Well the biggest event of all that has occurred in our sector is of course the drama of Rana Plaza. Then of course some things have occurred for example we have become members of the ACCORD because of that.

Company 4 was even *founded as a reaction to a focusing event: ...she eventually started this business from that factory that collapsed in Bangladesh.*

In addition, both CSR experts agreed that reactions have come to focusing events. Mostly that new organizations have been formed that influence the way businesses conduct their business CSR expert 2 mentioned: *Look Fashion Revolution has arised from Rana Plaza, so I think that's just very good.*

It can be concluded that focusing events have an effect on the CSR policies of garment firms. However, there has not been any CSR manager that mentioned using the occurrence of a focusing event as an external lever to sell an issue.

Taking everything together, the findings suggest that there are several external levers that issue sellers can use to successfully sell their issues. In addition, the findings give an indication how the external levers influence the selling strategies CSR managers use to obtain internal leverage. The findings seem to suggest that the external levers are not a substitute for the engagement strategies. Rather they complement the strategies that CSR managers already use. They are being used as extra tools to help CSR managers sell their issues successfully. This was well described by the CSR manager of company 8. He stated that the most important thing in issue selling is to get an internal support base from the managing board of the company. This internal support can be obtained by an internal strategy which is complemented with external factors. He expressed it as follows:

Answer: And ehh that also means that if the management is behind it. That resources are being made available. That your team can grow. That they also have the same agenda as you. And those other factors that help in obtaining that, are those external factors.

Question: That help to get that support?

Answer: Yes, but it starts with an internal strategy.

In the same way, the CSR manager from company 5 illustrated the use of external levers when she answered the question if she makes use of all sorts of external things like the law, NGOs, the media to help convince her managers and employees: *“Exactly, I use everything that comes on my path”*. Next, I will theorize what importance these findings have on understanding social issue selling.

Discussion

In this chapter, first, an interpretation of the results will be given. Thereafter, the theoretical and the practical contributions of the study will be discussed. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed and suggestion for future research will be given.

Interpretation of results

In the focal study, I tried to answer the research question: *“How do external levers influence the selling strategies that CSR managers of garment lead firms use to obtain internal leverage for social issues?”*. The findings of the current study show how external levers complement the internal engagement strategies described by Wickert and De Bakker (2018). The findings show that social issue sellers in Dutch garment firms try to adopt internal engagement strategies to sell their issues. Furthermore, the data suggests that issue sellers make use of external levers to make these internal strategies more effective. These external levers come in the form of governmental legislation, stakeholder pressures, and shareholder activism. Therefore, the current study adds another piece to the puzzle of how social issue sellers approach selling their issues.

Theoretical contributions

Social issue sellers have a need to find and adapt successful strategies to sell their issues. This is because social issues are often not treated as central issues to an organization's strategy (Sonenshein, 2006). Dutton et al. (2001) found that an issue seller has to know who to involve and how to involve this person in order to be successful at selling an issue. In addition, Wickert and De Bakker (2018) pointed out that social issue sellers rely on a relational approach to bring this finding of Dutton et al. (2001) into practice. The findings of the current research suggest the same conclusion. To overcome the barriers that social issue sellers face, the sellers try to create mutual understanding with issue buyers in a very prosocial manner.

Going beyond extant work on social issue selling, the data of the current study shows that issue sellers use all sorts of tools from outside the company to aid them in this relational approach. While not much attention has been paid to these external tools in the issue selling literature, outside of this field related conclusions have been made about the effect of external levers on the development of the CSR agenda of companies. Studies have shown that governmental legislation (Buhmann, 2016; Shum & Yam, 2011), stakeholder pressure (Schuessler et al., 2019), and shareholder activism in the form of lobbying by the company owner of a SME (McNulty & Nordberg, 2016) are external levers that have effect on internal

CSR policies. The findings of the current study show that these external factors are also used to create internal leverage by CSR managers. However, the findings do not suggest that CSR managers use the mentioning of focusing events as a strategy to create internal leverage. This might be the case because of the lack of transparency in the fashion supply chain (Khurana & Ricchetti, 2016) which makes it difficult to know for firms if they indirectly are related to a focusing event, and therefore it might feel for CSR managers that a focusing event is a too far from your bed show for their colleagues.

In sum, this study contributes to the already existing literature on issue selling a greater understanding on how social issue sellers try to sell their issues. In addition to the engagement strategies identified by Wickert and De Bakker (2018), issue sellers make use of all sorts of external levers to create internal leverage.

Practical implications

The findings hold several practical contributions as well. First of all, this study provides relevant insights for CSR managers of Dutch garment firms. Literature has shown that CSR managers often struggle with obtaining internal leverage (Risi & Wickert, 2017; Wickert & De Bakker, 2018). Based on the focal study, it is recommended that CSR managers should be aware of the external aids they can use to sell their social issues. This study showed that using the law, NGO pressure, media pressure, customer pressure, and shareholder activism as cards to draw might help them to sell their issues successfully.

The important role of external stakeholder pressure highlighted in this study, might hold practical insights for stakeholders as well. The relevance of external stakeholder pressure could suggest that these external stakeholders should try to collaborate with the CSR managers within firms. These so called ‘internal NGOs’ (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018), are important actors in the shaping and development of CSR policies and practices (Strand, 2013). The same could be said about governments. In order to make the global garment supply chain more responsible, the findings of the current study might suggest that collaborating with the CSR managers of garment firms would be an effective approach.

Limitations and avenues for future research

There are also several limitations to my study. As with many qualitative studies, it is hard to generalize the findings. Therefore, future research can look for the moves issue sellers make in different sociocultural contexts. Future comparative work in other countries than the Netherlands might be interesting to see if the findings of my study hold in different cultural

contexts. Besides, the current research was, with a few exceptions, conducted on SME companies. However, extant research highlights differences in how SMEs and MNCs engage in CSR (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). The SME studied in the focal case seemed to have embraced CSR practices already in the early stages of the companies life cycle. Therefore, they fall out of the originally intended scope, that of the fast fashion industry. Future research could try to conduct a study among large fast fashion corporations. Moreover, the current research mainly focused on what CSR managers do to sell their issues, but not on what are actually effective strategies to sell social issues. Future research could look into what the relationship is between use of external levers by social issue sellers and the actual achievement of social impact by companies.

Overall, following up on the ideas of this study might give us a better understanding of the dynamics of issue selling, which is of great significance because it might help companies to have a greater positive social impact (Wickert & De Bakker, 2018).

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Appendix A

Script interview questions

Before interview has started

- Interviewer gives general explanation of what issue selling entails and what the respondent can expect from the interviewee
- Interviewee is asked consent to record the interview

General info

- What position do you have, what does it involve?
- How long have you been working in that position and/or firm?
- Is there a CSR department?

Internal strategies

- Can you tell me an example of how you sold an issue to your colleagues, recent example?
 - How do you convince other managers of the importance of an issue?
- If you think back, what were the major events and decisions in relation to your company's stance to CSR?
 - How did this impact the implementation of CSR?
- What other functions do you usually need to involve? Please explain which actors are involved in the implementation of CSR.
 - Which goals do they pursue, and what are their incentives and motives?
- Have you experienced any resistance or challenges to your projects? Can you describe the major challenges that a CSR professional commonly faces?
- Please describe the biggest conflicts and barriers you confronted. Which aspects complicate the interaction and collaboration with other actors?
 - Can you give me a concrete example?
- What are the competencies that a CSR professional needs?

External levers

- General opener question around external pressures/situations helping them in selling their issue?
- Background: explain what is meant by external levers and which ones literature distinguishes
- Legal developing in general: Recently the Dutch Child Labor Due Diligence Law has been developed, does this law have an influence on how CSR is implemented in your organization? If so, how? Examples?
 - How does this help you sell your ideas to colleagues?
- Are there external stakeholders (like NGOs, media, etc.) that try to pressure your company to change CSR policies? If so, which actors?
 - How does this help you sell your ideas to colleagues?
- Do shareholders of your company try to to pressure your company to change CSR policies? If so, how? (if there are no public shareholders, question is raised about company owner)

- How does this help you sell your ideas to colleagues?
- Have there been focusing events that helped you sell your issues? Do you have an example?

Relationship between internal and external

Relevance of each of the factors? What factor is most relevant in your experience? Are the internal strategies more important or the external levers?

Ending

- Is there anything that you find important to mention? Have I missed something that is of importance to you?
- Is there anyone you could recommend for me as an interviewee?