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Moving Beyond Dialogic Communication: How Social Media Supports CSR Stakeholder Engagement Among German Climate Activists

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ABSTRACT

In times of multiple environmental and social crises, corporate communication and engagement practices related to sustainability, summarized here under the umbrella concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), are becoming increasingly important. Social media has the potential to support interaction between companies and their stakeholders in the context of CSR. However, the current form of social media is not designed to support dialogic interaction, making the realization of this potential difficult. Nevertheless, this study argues that social media can still fulfill functions that support stakeholder engagement for CSR. Although research often focuses on the effectiveness of corporate communication in eliciting responses on social media, stakeholders' perspectives on online communication have received less attention. This case study is based on nine interviews with German climate activists and analyzes stakeholder communication from their perspective. Drawing on the interviews and the critical tasks of stakeholder engagement outlined in the literature, this study identifies barriers to interaction between companies and stakeholders and proposes five alternative functions of social media in this context. These are (1.1) responsible agency and (1.2) being part of the climate (filter) bubble—finding allies; (2.1) pre-testing ideas and (2.2) allowing (constructive) confrontation, to soften the dialogic fronts; and (3) monitoring key concerns.

1 | Introduction

1.1 | Stakeholder Engagement in the Context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Companies are increasingly held accountable by society for their impacts on the social and natural environment. From the perspective of CSR, companies have to react to societal demands and engage stakeholders to identify risks and opportunities, support decision-making processes, and co-create value for society (Freeman and Reed 1983; Freeman et al. 2004; Hörisch et al. 2014; Parmar et al. 2010; Patzer et al. 2018). CSR in this sense can be characterized as a process in which companies and stakeholders define "what responsibility exactly entails, and how it should be implemented, monitored, or sanctioned" (de Bakker 2015).

According to Greenwood (2007), stakeholder engagement is generally described as "practices the organisation undertakes to involve stakeholders in a positive manner in organisational activities" (Greenwood 2007, 315). In the case of CSR, this includes a moral component that sees stakeholder engagement as a process characterized by mutual respect and commitment based on dialogue and aimed at gaining legitimacy for corporate actions related to environmental and social concerns (Kujala et al. 2022; Manetti and Toccafondi 2012).

Hörisch et al. (2014) identify three critical tasks for stakeholder engagement in the context of CSR: "strengthening the particular sustainability interests of stakeholders; creating mutual sustainability interests based on these particular interests; and empowering stakeholders to act as intermediaries for nature and sustainable development" (Hörisch et al. 2014, 328).

According to Morsing and Schultz (2006), ideal stakeholder engagement is characterized by an iterative process of co-constructing CSR measures with two-way, symmetrical communication at its core. This broadens the perspective beyond the linear communication model, in which companies act as senders and stakeholders as passive receivers of information, to include more dialogic forms of communication. These dialogic forms are described by ongoing processes of sensemaking and sensegiving (Morsing and Schultz 2006). Thus, a strategy that provides stakeholders with the opportunity to offer feedback but in a manner that is controlled by the company, such as through surveys, does not constitute stakeholder engagement in the strict sense (Golob and Podnar 2014; Morsing and Schultz 2006). Questions of power asymmetries are closely linked to this understanding of engagement, as they shape both dialogue and decision-making processes within CSR contexts. Following Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholder salience is defined by three relational attributes: (1) the power of stakeholders to influence an organization, (2) the legitimacy of stakeholders, and (3) the urgency with which stakeholder claims require attention (Mitchell et al. 1997). Consequently, whereas some stakeholders exercise more influence, others may be marginalized, which calls into question the legitimacy of stakeholder engagement and its outcomes (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2019). To achieve two-way, symmetrical engagement, power imbalances must be made explicit within stakeholder engagement processes, and strategies must be implemented to empower "weak" actors (Gray et al. 2022).

Social media platforms have the potential to reach a wide audience and elicit an immediate reaction to the information disclosed by companies. In this sense, such platforms could facilitate engagement with stakeholders beyond the unidirectional provision of sustainability information (Colleoni 2013; Elving and Postma 2017; Fieseler et al. 2010) and help to reach additional stakeholder groups. This study aims to shed light on stakeholder engagement on social media within the context of the CSR management of companies.

1.2 | Potential and Risks for Stakeholder Engagement on Social Media

Social media offers the technological possibility of two-way communication and (near) real-time feedback, which in turn can serve as a means of initiating a discourse on company-related content. This may also support the critical tasks defined by Hörisch et al. (2014). For instance, it can stimulate interactive discussions about plans, emerging issues, and innovations related to the company's CSR management and empower various stakeholders to participate in these interactions. Furthermore, the accessibility of social media to a wide range of stakeholders leads to changes in power dynamics, opening the possibility for the inclusion of different voices and points of view (Castelló et al. 2016; Kent and Taylor 2016). Stakeholders can directly challenge companies, and discourses can develop beyond the corporate sphere of influence or even without the companies' awareness, which means that CSR communication is no longer entirely company controlled (Schultz et al. 2013). Stakeholder engagement thereby becomes more complex and entails greater risks for companies (Castelló et al. 2013; Elving and Postma 2017).

Climate activists and other stakeholders can use social media to initiate social change by structuring "public discussions and actions around wicked problems" (Kent and Taylor 2021, 2), such as climate change, and by defining the responsibilities of different actors in addressing these problems.

Nevertheless, even using social media "for a good cause" poses certain risks and challenges that must be considered (Kent and Taylor 2021):

- User preferences are strongly influenced by demographic characteristics such as age and gender, which limits the range of people who can be addressed with a specific platform.
- Social media metrics are not sufficient in providing information on the success of messages from a social change point of view. These interactions are not the same as (stakeholder) dialogue, as they may lack key elements such as symmetrical two-way communication and relationship building (Kent and Taylor 2016). On the other hand, not all elements of dialogical interactions, such as the co-creation of knowledge, are visible online, and therefore, not all elements can be captured by social media metrics.
- Social media often provides little room for ambiguity, encouraging strident and provocative statements rather than the balanced, considerate discussions needed for exploring complex issues such as climate change (see also Milli et al. 2025, next chapter).
- Social media—in its current commercial form—is often not a friendly or safe space environment, which may discourage individuals from contributing to discussions for fear of negative comments or even cyber-bullying.

1.3 | Social Media and Stakeholder Engagement in Practice

Genuine two-way interactions between stakeholder groups and companies, which are a crucial part of stakeholder engagement, remain the exception online. This has been confirmed by various authors and case studies (Abitbol and Lee 2017; Elving and Postma 2017; Gómez-Carrasco et al. 2021; Kent and Taylor 2021; Pizzi et al. 2021).

This can be explained partly by structural factors but also by the actions of those responsible for communication.

Studies support the argument that the commercialized form of social media, including its algorithmic design, governance models, and underlying economic incentives,

systematically constrains meaningful user engagement (Gaupp and Eker 2024; Milli et al. 2025). Filter bubbles are created when algorithmically curated content presented to users ultimately leads to "spheres" in which only like-minded individuals interact (Miller et al. 2021). On platforms such as Twitter (now X) and Facebook, this dynamic leads to polarization and the formation of "homophilic clusters" that do not interact with each other (Gaupp and Eker 2024, 12). Furthermore, Milli et al. (2025) demonstrate that Twitter's engagement-based ranking algorithm fails to accurately reflect users' preferences. Instead, it amplifies emotionally charged, out-group hostile content that users report as exacerbating their negative feelings toward their political out-group (Milli et al. 2025), thereby widening the divide between groups. Filter bubbles also pose challenges for activists. In their study of nature conservation practitioners, Miller et al. (2021) found that these practitioners were concerned that such bubbles make it difficult to reach or engage with individuals who do not already hold positive attitudes toward nature conservation.

Thus, some authors argue that stakeholder engagement is not possible on current platforms and that social media itself must be extensively reorganized and restructured if it is to fulfill its potential as a space for dialogue (Illia et al. 2017; Kent and Taylor 2021). This would mean that social media platforms are created from the outset to facilitate discussion and social change rather than to serve marketing or sales purposes (Kent and Taylor 2021, 7). For example, dialogue would be supported by features such as "reachable and known moderators," "unique comment buttons such as 'agree', 'respect', 'interesting', 'inspiring' and 'persuasive'," and "advanced privacy settings options," to name a few of Kent's suggested features (see Kent and Taylor 2021, 8, for the full list).

When considering reasons for the lack of engagement among communicating actors, one reason in the case of CSR is that "most companies prefer interactions that are controlled by themselves, while only a few of them are ready to have open conversations on topics that stakeholders and civil society want to discuss" (Illia et al. 2017). This finding is further supported by Gómez-Carrasco et al. (2021), who examined CSR communication by banks on Twitter. They identified different communication strategies depending on whether stakeholders were outsiders or insiders. Whereas external stakeholders are more likely to post information directly related to banks' core business activities, bank representatives themselves often post information about philanthropic events or other CSR activities that are only marginally related to their core business (Gómez-Carrasco et al. 2021). This leads to a discrepancy between the genuine concerns of stakeholders and the information provided by companies (Gómez-Carrasco et al. 2021). Within this context, social media is primarily used as a marketing tool rather than as an interactive platform (Elving and Postma 2017).

In response to this lack of dialogue at the actor level, researchers have explored different communication strategies and evaluated the forms and content of messages to initiate and facilitate engagement and dialogue (Abitbol and Lee 2017; Araujo and Kollat 2018; Capriotti et al. 2021; DiStaso and Bortree 2012; Pizzi et al. 2021; Viglia et al. 2018).

Given the negative assessment of commercialized social media at both structural and actor levels, the question arises as to whether social media, in its current form, holds any value for corporate stakeholder engagement and, if so, how this value can be realized. Although many studies adopt the perspective of companies, as the initiators of CSR stakeholder engagement, to answer this question, fewer studies focus on the stakeholders' side and analyze their views on interacting with companies on social media. This study addresses this under-researched area by conducting nine interviews with climate activists in Germany. Based on the analysis of these interviews, insights can be provided, within the constraints of this sample, that may inform further research into how stakeholder engagement processes could benefit from social media use.

Adopting a pragmatic perspective, this study asks: If social media does not fulfill its potential for stakeholder engagement, as demonstrated by several studies, and if no alternative virtual spaces for stakeholder engagement exist, can social media still contribute to stakeholder engagement in the context of CSR in other ways?

This question is addressed from the perspective of climate activists in Germany, by integrating their views on interactions with companies in general and their intentions when using social media. Like nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), activist groups are part of civil society, but according to de Bakker (2015), their distinctive characteristic is their "intention to establish institutional change." This is achieved through contesting old norms, standards, or operating procedures, developing alternatives, and convincing responsible actors to adopt these alternatives. The tactics employed in these processes are related to the activists' ideological position. Whereas more radical activist groups press for drastic changes, relying more on the "symbolic impact" that can be created by a small number of people, moderate groups aim for incremental changes that require the mobilization "of a larger number of protesters" (de Bakker 2015, 28).

Fridays for Future is an example of like-minded activists who "coalesce into collaborative pressure groups" and "seek change in others through mobilisation, symbolic protest and rational discourse" (Kirsop-Taylor et al. 2023). The main goals of Fridays for Future are the implementation of the Paris Agreement and its 1.5-degree global warming target, as well as supporting a just transition (Fridays for Future 2025). From a company's perspective, Fridays for Future remains a powerful stakeholder group representing civil society. Despite support decreasing over time, it meets the criteria for a salient stakeholder group (cf. Mitchell et al. 1997). Fridays for Future Germany is internationally connected and can still mobilize thousands of people for demonstrations across Germany. The group is widely recognized as legitimate in its fight against climate change, and its concerns are considered urgent. From a company's perspective, Fridays for Future is a significant stakeholder group, suggesting that companies will interact with them in various ways. The activists, therefore, provide a suitable case study for online stakeholder engagement on the key CSR issue of climate change. Moreover, Fridays for Future is an example of an activist group that successfully combined

online and offline forms of activism and mobilization of civil society (Belotti et al. 2022; Vancsó and Kovács-Magosi 2024).

Building on this foundation, the analysis focuses on the role of social media in its commercialized form for stakeholder engagement. The critical tasks or challenges of stakeholder engagement in the context of CSR, as defined by Hörisch et al. (2014), serve as a reference point for the analysis and as a structure for the discussion. They are used to analyze the descriptive results of the interviews and generate suggestions for further research into how social media might still be useful for stakeholder engagement, despite its known structural constraints.

The following section describes the methodology and presents the results. Next, Section 4 analyzes the barriers and alternative functions of social media for stakeholder engagement from the perspective of the stakeholders. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's findings.

2 | Method

With the support of the German environmental activists' group Fridays for Future, the interview request was sent to all local groups, describing the purpose of the interview and inviting participants. The rationale behind the interviews was clearly communicated in the request (see the rationale of the interview guide in Appendix A.1), and the group was free to decide who should be interviewed. Although this open request was necessary to identify motivated participants with the expertise and confidence to speak on behalf of their respective groups, it also resulted in the overrepresentation of men and a potential gender bias. As all participants described their group's democratic decision-making process regarding stakeholder engagement during the interviews, it is assumed that this had no significant impact on the core aspects of this study. Nevertheless, the risk of gender bias cannot be fully eliminated, which constitutes one of the study's limitations.

A semistructured interview guide was created and discussed among multiple researchers. As the interview focused on the perspectives of stakeholders rather than the corporate side of CSR as a managerial concept, the questions were designed to assess, indirectly, the contribution of social media interaction to CSR, based on activists' interpretations. The final interview guide addressed the following framing questions:

1. How is Twitter functionalized by activists (only for campaigning, also for exchange)?
2. How is the exchange with companies (online and offline) characterized and evaluated from the stakeholders' perspective (dialogic intention of activities)?
3. What role does social media play in exchanges with companies?
4. How are tweets from companies perceived by FFF activists (impact/success factors), and how is the decision made as to how and whether to respond to them?

The interviews were conducted between December 2022 and April 2023 using the video conference tool *Zoom* and were automatically transcribed with the help of the open-source language model *Whisper* and the user interface *Buzz*. All transcripts were manually edited before analysis. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.1.

The resulting interview sample included seven activists from different regional groups and one from the national Fridays for Future group in Germany, as well as one activist from another smaller climate activist group. Most of the interviewees were students, two were employed, and two were still in school. Respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 55, with a median age of 22. Only one of the interviewees was female, and the others were male. Eight out of nine interviewed activists had experience with the official social media accounts of their respective regional or national groups. The work in the groups is not specialized; that is, everyone does all tasks at some point, but in most cases, this includes social media activities (seven interviewees) and/or public relations activities (five interviewees). Figure 1 gives an overview of the research design.

The transcribed interviews were structured and analyzed by applying qualitative data analysis, which aims to conclude certain aspects of communication by proceeding in a systematic and rule-based manner (Mayring 2015). The software MAXQDA 2020 was used for analysis. MAXQDA is a comprehensive software tool used in qualitative research to manage, organize, and analyze diverse datasets, including texts and transcripts. Its primary functions include systematic coding and categorization of qualitative data.

The steps of qualitative analysis consist of reducing the data by structuring it along codes and subcodes, finding patterns by linking the coded data, and drawing conclusions (Miles and Huberman 2008). A code in this sense is "a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña 2013, 38). By taking into account the frequency of codes, the approach also rests on a typifying structuring approach to qualitative data analysis (cf. Mayring 2015, 104–106). Although the frequency of recurring patterns was used to emphasize a particular meaning, it should not be confused with statistical frequency.

The code system was partly deductively derived and structured along the questions of the interview guide and complemented by describing, paraphrasing, and summarizing answers into (inductive) codes. Only one coder refined the code system in several rounds of coding, but the code system, including the related decisions and rules for coding, was discussed among fellow researchers to support reliability.

The descriptive coding system used in the first round was employed to analyze and derive possible social media functions for stakeholder engagement from the perspective of climate activists. To achieve this, the results were interpreted in light of the literature and through the lens of the stakeholder engagement function provided by Hörisch et al. (2014). The assignment of functions to codes was also part of the internal discussion with fellow researchers to support decision-making. Figure 2 depicts the coding process.

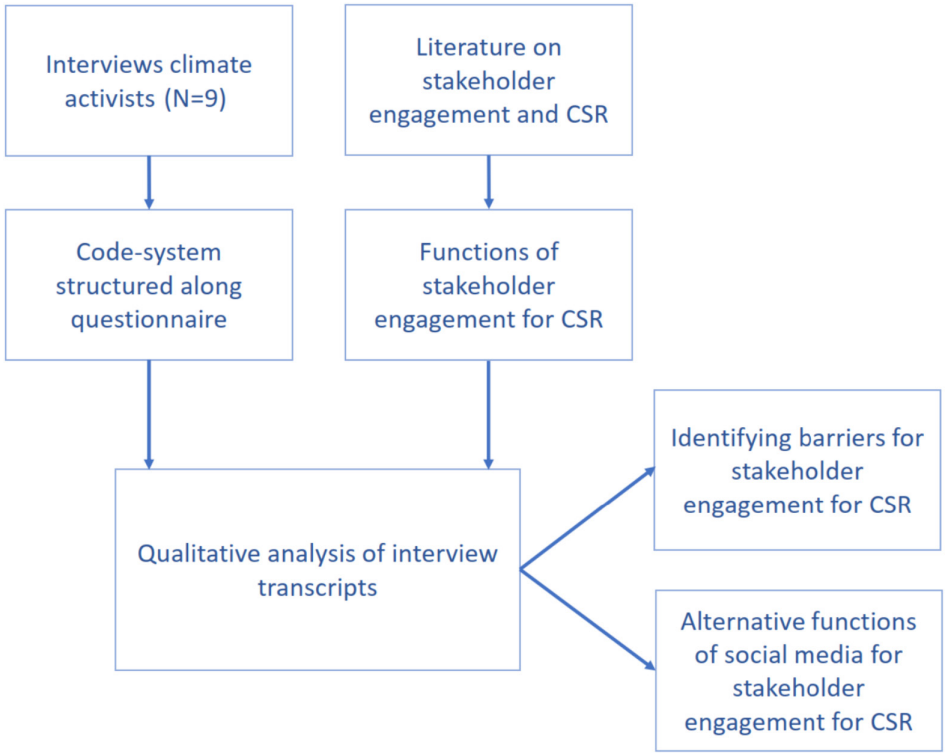

FIGURE 1 | Research design.

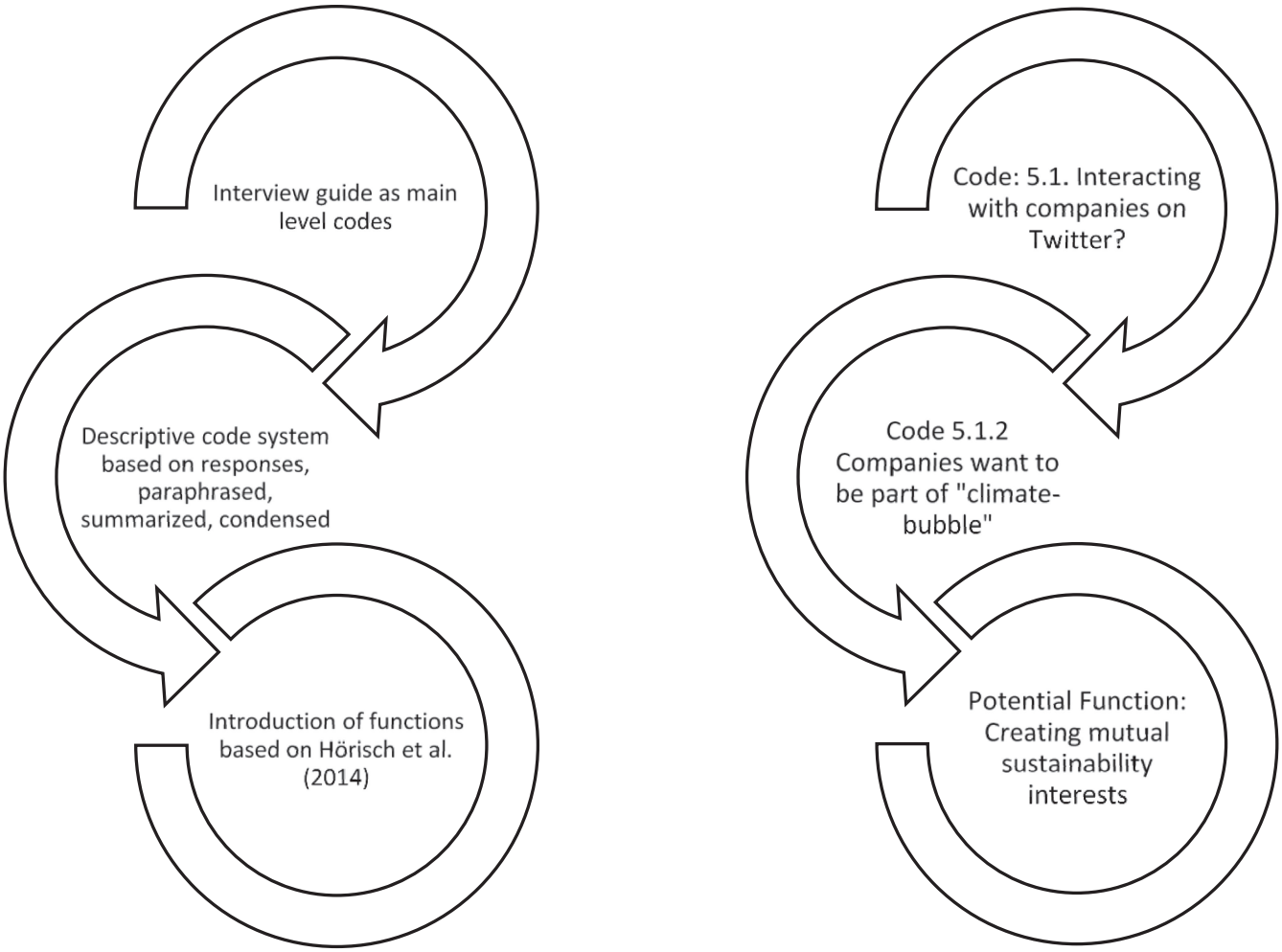

FIGURE 2 | Coding process.

3 | Results

The interviews were analyzed in terms of the general topics of "cooperation with companies," "activists' use of social media," "interaction with companies on social media," and the "relationship between different forms of online and offline interaction."

3.1 | Cooperation With Companies in General

When asked about their views on cooperation with companies, activists expressed their biggest concern as the risk of being misused for greenwashing purposes (eight out of nine interviewees). This concern is expressed, for example, by the following statement (all subsequent quotes have been translated from German):

> You have to look very closely at what the purpose of the invitation is. Many companies want to use Fridays for Future or their activists to greenwash themselves. In that they build up their own green image by inviting environmental activists or climate activists to show: "Hey, I'm dealing with this topic, it's super important, and we have taken it seriously as a company, and that's why we now have this and that person here, who brings in the perspective." But at the same time, you have to see how serious the company really is. If the company doesn't do anything else, but really only takes this one event and then wants to use you as a person or you as a movement to put itself in a greener light, then you have to see it a bit more critically and maybe also consider whether you take part or not.
>
> (Interviewee 5)

Conversely, activists welcome the opportunity to voice criticism when they have the chance to speak at shareholder meetings or discuss issues with company representatives at conferences, for example (four interviewees). This is not only seen as a unilateral process but can, in some cases, also lead to constructive exchange and mutual learning processes:

> Yes, I always find it very enriching to actually be at these conferences. So, when the corporate bubble of an industry or for a topic really comes together, there are a lot of different companies, but they all talk from the same perspective, and it's all so ritualised and institutionalised, and then a politician comes and gives a greeting speech. And sometimes, as an activist, you can crash in a bit, break the script a bit. And then sometimes very, very cool new spaces are created, of which company people or politicians say that they haven't had this space before. And then you actually find very cool, unofficial forms of exchange, and then I think both sides learn something. So, we learn some content-related things, and they learn, well, they are reminded a little bit that this is not just a technical topic here, but to bring in this meta perspective again, and to be aware of what they are actually doing when they say we are transforming our company.
>
> (Interviewee 8)

Moreover, activists' willingness to interact with companies depends on how sustainable or ethical the company is perceived to be (four interviewees):

> There are companies that I believe behave more ethically than others within the framework we have. We even have ... Fridays for Future is also repeatedly supported by companies and such.
>
> (Interviewee 1)

Cooperation is also considered useful when specific, often regional, and relevant topics or occasions are under discussion (six interviewees):

> I always believe that when it comes to very strong regional references cooperation is wanted, when people are actually affected in their environment by constructional changes, by planned measures, and be it through noise, through a deterioration of the microclimate, for example, or other emissions, but also through a negative landscape design, let's call it that, such as an open-cast lignite mine.
>
> (Interviewee 9)

If cooperation is actively sought by activists, this is more likely directed towards public associations, such as chambers of commerce or housing associations (four interviewees).

Decisions about whom the group should interact or collaborate with are mostly made on a case-by-case basis (eight interviewees), so there is no set strategy or fixed set of rules that must be applied.

3.2 | The Use of Social Media by Activists

Social media plays an important role for climate activist groups but primarily for maintaining and building their own networks rather than for interacting with companies. Therefore, the activists identify the mobilization of people (seven interviewees) and the dissemination of information on climate-related issues (seven interviewees) as the most important functions of social media, along with generating public pressure primarily on politicians but also on companies (six interviewees). Additionally, social media supports the development of advocacy networks, including the international climate activist scene, as well as NGOs, academia, and politicians (six interviewees):

> Our biggest lever is social media, so to speak. Then, of course, it has networking potential, not only with

> the people who visit us now, for example, in [name of city] on the strike or something, but also in the international climate scene or with journalists [...]. Or we sometimes have the opportunity to write to the climate activism scenes in other countries or to network throughout Germany. We also do that via messenger services, but that also works partly via social media. The same goes for climate activists from other countries or climate scientists. So, it's more or less networking.
>
> (Interviewee 3)

3.3 | Interaction With Companies on Social Media

The majority of respondents state that there is little interaction with companies on social media (seven interviewees). When companies are approached by activists on social media, this often takes the form of campaigns against specific projects of the company, such as open-cast lignite mines (seven interviewees). This observation applies to social media in general and to Twitter in particular. In the perception of activists, companies show little interest in interacting with stakeholder groups on social media (seven interviewees):

> So, it's often the case that a corporate account broadcasts without interacting too much. And from our side, it is also like that we mhm ... also rather address the politicians [...].
>
> (Interviewee 3)

Whereas some companies with climate-friendly business models, such as renewable energy providers, reach out to activist groups on social media such as Twitter to be or become part of the "climate bubble," most interviewees indicate that there are few to no interactions between activists and companies on Twitter. The reasons for this are twofold: first, corporate responsibility, as respondents assume that companies tend to ignore critical tweets (four interviewees); and second, activists often avoid interaction out of fear of being instrumentalized by companies to distribute corporate content on Twitter (six interviewees). In the perception of activists, companies do not tag regional activist groups to communicate with them directly. The main motivation for activist groups to engage with corporate tweets is to provide clarification, for example, when their activities are misrepresented or to expose instances of corporate greenwashing (seven interviewees):

> If we are mentioned or tagged somewhere and it is not true, for example, what is presented there, then of course we comment on that or if—the national group sometimes does this—if, for example, a company celebrates itself for a particularly great new climate protection measure that they have implemented, but which in reality does not bring much or so, then that is commented on.
>
> (Interviewee 2)

In addition, three of the respondents indicated that the relevance of the content could also increase the likelihood of a response from the activist group. According to one activist, Twitter can be a place of constructive debate when tweets focus on information rather than provocation:

> I've noticed that on Twitter, every meaningful debate with actual arguments is triggered by an article that someone has posted or by an extensive thread, not by such short two-liners with populist content.
>
> (Interviewee 7)

3.4 | Online and Offline Communication and Mixed Forms

Depending on the context, activists equally view online and offline communication as effective. Arguments in favor of offline conversation include the need for confidentiality, which is often preferred by companies, and the opportunity to build personal relationships. Other arguments include the importance of body language in conflict situations, the absence of which often leads to misunderstandings in online conversations, and the greater chance of convincing people offline. Conversely, younger people often turn to social media first for any kind of interaction. Online conversations are also more transparent, and sometimes public pressure is needed to initiate an interaction in the first place. In rare cases, such online campaigns also lead to an offline exchange (three interviewees).

4 | Discussion

The interviews suggest that Fridays for Future are moderate activists, as defined by de Bakker (2015), in that they rely on mobilizing people to foster (incremental) change and are open to interacting with companies to a certain degree (see also Section 1.3). Social media is thus primarily a means of mobilizing people for offline and online protests to question the effectiveness of current norms, standards, and procedures. It is also used to target decision-makers and to lobby for stricter norms, standards, and procedures to effectively tackle climate change (cf. de Bakker 2015). According to the interviews, interactions with companies on social media are not very common and mostly occur in a confrontational setting or with progressive companies that are close to the "climate-friendly bubble." Taking into account the architecture of commercialized social media, these are also interactions that tend to be incentivized by algorithmic logic, where the divide between in- and outgroup and confrontational content is favored (cf. Milli et al. 2025).

The interviewed participants do not see many opportunities to interact with companies on social media outside of the climate bubble. This confirms the tendency toward polarization as an inherent characteristic of Twitter (see also Section 1.3). According to the interviewed activists, possible interaction spaces are created through stakeholder-driven interactions, such as campaigns to highlight "corporate climate laggards," or company-initiated

interactions in response to posts that require clarification from the activists' perspective. The idea of "true" stakeholder engagement, as defined by Morsing and Schultz (2006), as debating and co-creating norms, standards, and procedures through an iterative sensemaking/sensegiving process, is highly unlikely. However, the critical tasks identified by Hörisch et al. (2014)—namely, strengthening the sustainability interests of stakeholders, creating mutual sustainability interests, and empowering stakeholders to act as intermediaries for nature and sustainable development—can provide an orientation framework that helps us to consider the potential of social media for stakeholder engagement, despite the known structural barriers. To this end, first, communication barriers are identified that could hinder interaction in general, and then alternative social media functions are proposed based on these findings.

4.1 | Identified Barriers

The promotional tone of most posts, combined with the lack of relevant information, appears to be an obstacle to stakeholder engagement, according to the results of the interviews. The impression that companies only post sustainability-related content for marketing purposes and not for interest in interaction leads to the overall perception of greenwashing activities. This is a barrier to *strengthening the sustainability interests of stakeholders* and *creating mutual interests with them*. This view is reinforced by the stakeholders' impression that their criticism is often ignored. Both this and the lack of tangible information in companies' posts are also barriers to *empowering stakeholders*.

Companies should be aware that such advertising messages could negatively impact their stakeholder relationships, not only by reducing stakeholder interest but also by promoting their perception as being untrustworthy. Although both companies and stakeholders communicate with their respective audiences, the interviews revealed that a lack of direct interaction does not equate to a complete lack of awareness of posts from the "opposite side." It cannot be ruled out that the loss of interest in interacting with a company online also affects (future) offline stakeholder engagement, but this would need to be investigated in further studies. In any case, companies should evaluate whether other assumed benefits, such as reaching shareholders, politicians, or media with these messages, outweigh these risks.

Another main barrier for interaction, especially for *creating mutual sustainability interests on social media*, is the generation of unwanted attention for the messages of companies. This should not be encouraged from the perspective of stakeholders, confirming the algorithmic incentivization as a barrier to interaction. Whereas most activists have no interest in sharing corporate posts on social media, they want to correct misleading corporate content. This could be the case when they either think their group's positions or activities are misrepresented or confront corporations with opposing views, especially when corporations tweet about their successes in the fight against climate change. Moreover, activists indicated that exchanges with companies are generally important, but that they see themselves in a critical and opposing role rather than in an advisory or collaborative role. However, from the perspective of the interviewed activists, social media is still seen as an important means of criticizing companies and as a place for discourse, but only when tweets are not "short two-liners with populist content," as one of the interviewees put it.

In most interviews, it became clear that the public nature of online communication is partly seen as an obstacle to dialogic interaction as the base of "true" stakeholder engagement and as a prerequisite for *creating mutual interests* and *empowering stakeholders*. However, public pressure can be an advantage in increasing the willingness of companies to respond to stakeholder demands. In some interviews, respondents mentioned that online communication can potentially facilitate offline engagement.

4.2 | Alternative Functions of Social Media to Serve Critical Stakeholder Tasks

Based on the identified barriers and the knowledge gathered in the interviews regarding the perspectives of stakeholders on

- interaction with companies in general, and
- particularly on social media, as well as
- the usage and advantages of social media for stakeholders themselves

three main alternative functions of social media can be identified. These functions are based on extending the filter bubble, monitoring stakeholders, and contesting sensemaking. These functions are explained in more detail below.

1. Stakeholder engagement as an extension of the filter bubble

1.1 Being part of the climate (filter) bubble—finding allies

One topic mentioned in the interviews was the existence of climate bubbles on social media, which companies with more climate-friendly business models, such as renewable energy providers, might become a part of. Interviewees might react to posts by companies that show a certain engagement on social media, such as posting regularly and trying to interact with climate activists, and that are at the same time more trustworthy because they rely on a climate-friendlier business model. Activists, on the other hand, can increase attention for their causes when reacting to such posts because company accounts are openly accessible to the social media public. Moreover, because one of the most important functions of social media for activists is finding allies to push policy discourses and set agendas for climate change issues, this could potentially also include "green" companies when overlaps in interest occur, such as supporting renewable energy by advocating for certain policies.

1.2 Responsible agency on social media

The interviews showed that interactions depend on the progressiveness of companies in their own climate change measures (see Section 3.1). More progressive companies have been named in the interviews as cooperation partners but mainly

in the context of offline cooperation. Thus, these companies might take on the role of "responsible agency" on social media as defined by Patzer et al. (2018). This assigns companies an active role as social actors by initiating discourse and negotiating shared values and norms. Although this is often related to internal company processes and employees, this idea could also be transferred to external interactions on social media. It would mean that companies not only initiate threads but also feel responsible for ensuring fair and constructive exchanges. In the context of stakeholder engagement for sustainability, this would serve the purpose of *strengthening the sustainability interests of stakeholders* (Hörisch et al. 2014, 328). Considering the main barrier to increasing interest in sustainability—the potential perception of greenwashing—this points to the key difficulty that companies need to be trustworthy in their sustainable development efforts—for example, by embracing a green business model—to truly take on the role of responsible leadership in social media. Moreover, the willingness of companies to be responsible for the thread they started and not "checking out" of the conversation at some point are additional factors that might support a constructive debate in this regard.

2. Stakeholder engagement as sensegiving to hashtags

Clarification and confrontation are two main drivers for interaction, as stated by the interviewed activists. This is interesting when hashtags are not only seen as a means for classifying, categorizing, or indexing content but also in their function "of enabling, coproducing, and/or contesting actors" (Albu and Etter 2016, 8). The struggle over the meaning of certain hashtags relevant to climate activists, such as #fightfor1point5, can lead to engagement in the form of (contested) sensemaking/sensegiving processes on social media. On the one hand, contesting hashtags can bring together filter bubbles that do not interact in reality, allowing confrontation to soften the dialogic fronts. On the other hand, such hashtags can be used to draw attention to innovations or ideas and to test them out in advance.

2.1 Stakeholder engagement as (constructive) confrontation to soften the dialogic fronts

Giving meaning to certain hashtags could provide a form of engagement, for example, for companies such as traditional energy providers and climate activists whose positions are currently so incompatible that "real-life" exchanges are unlikely. In this sense, getting to know each other's positions could create relationships that might support dialogic exchanges in the (possibly far) future, even if they may be incremental. According to the interviewed activists, most of the conversations on social media are confrontational in nature but range from critical comments to confrontations or campaigns with little exchange. Activists cited conflict or the need for clarification, for example, when hashtags are used in a way with which they do not agree, as one reason for interaction. This is consistent with research emphasizing the important role of dissent and conflict in CSR communication and legitimization on social media, as opposed to consensus-building, which appears to be impossible online (Castelló and Lopez-Berzosa 2023; Schultz et al. 2013).

However, it can be assumed that a neutral tone, a disclosure of relevant information, and a high fit with the company's core business model could support more constructive dissent, but this is outside the research boundaries of this study and should be a subject for further investigation.

2.2 Stakeholder engagements as pre-testing ideas before initiating real-life stakeholder engagement

By using certain hashtags, social media can serve as a medium for pre-testing ideas and gathering a first round of criticism in an accessible way. Although one might assume that this function is less risky for companies with a "greener" business model, this can also be fruitful for other companies. Again, building trust and avoiding the impression of greenwashing should be at the heart of the strategy by presenting ideas and projects that are related to the core business and providing all relevant information. Examples that could be found on Twitter, at the time of the interviews, include the announcement of a pilot project to test a new hydrogen-based production technology or the presentation of carbon capture and utilization projects. By describing these projects in concrete terms, they can invite specific criticism and thus offer an opportunity to "test the water." Under these circumstances, pre-testing ideas can at least partly serve the function of *empowering stakeholders to act as intermediaries for nature and sustainable development* (Hörisch et al. 2014, 328), although it cannot replace a more comprehensive (offline) stakeholder engagement process.

3. Stakeholder engagement as monitoring stakeholder groups and their concerns

The interviews showed that social media plays an important role for activists. The most commonly cited functions are mobilizing people, disseminating climate-related information, and using social media as a public leverage tool to be heard by politicians but also by the media and companies. The fact that activists, not surprisingly, use social media primarily to build their own advocacy networks can be a barrier to exchange with companies. However, it can also be seen as an opportunity for companies to identify and select stakeholder groups and to monitor their key concerns as a prerequisite for securing stakeholder interest. These steps are considered crucial in operational models of stakeholder engagement (cf. Lane and Devin 2018). It can also be a basis for companies to respond to the concerns of activists in a trust-building way—for example, through posts that contain facts and concrete statements with regard to stakeholder concerns. Additionally, monitoring key concerns also serves the purpose of *creating mutual sustainability interests with stakeholders*, as one of the important tasks of stakeholder engagement in the context of sustainability (Hörisch et al. 2014, 328).

4.3 | Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative case study has a small sample of participants from a specific societal stakeholder group. Therefore, it cannot be transferred to other contexts or generalized without further research. The sample is also imbalanced in terms of gender, which may introduce bias into the results. Based on the perspective of a small group of participants, the study's contribution is

to provide starting points or anchor points for further discussion and research on how stakeholder engagement and social media in its current form can be brought together, especially when the ideal of dialogic interaction seems unachievable. Other limitations are the changes introduced when Elon Musk took over and Twitter became X. Although there is a lack of empirical studies that have systematically examined changes in interaction and communication behaviors on X compared to Twitter, it is known that some groups and individuals have left the platform (not Fridays for Future), which may further reduce the opportunity for interaction.

However, given the constraints of the small and unbalanced sample, further qualitative and quantitative research is necessary to analyze whether the identified functions are valid and how they can be realized. Further research could also identify boundary conditions, for example, relating to "softening dialogic fronts" versus unconstructive "shitstorms" on social media. Research on stakeholder engagement on social media cannot ignore the ambivalence of commercialized platforms for social interaction and the known negative influence on societies. Future research should shed more light on the constraints of social media for stakeholder engagement and consider alternative ways for virtual exchange. Further research involving activists from different countries and backgrounds could help reveal the relationships between key themes such as trust, perception, and the willingness to cooperate online and offline, as well as the factors influencing online stakeholder engagement. For instance:

- The interviews revealed that activists are far more likely to engage with companies that they perceive as being genuinely ethical or sustainable. This positive perception creates a willingness to interact both online and offline. Conversely, a lack of trust and the resulting fear of exploitation for greenwashing purposes create resistance, making interaction initiated by companies online less likely. The interviews showed that a lack of responsiveness, as well as advertising-oriented versus fact-oriented messages, could potentially influence perception. Further studies could examine trust-building online in greater depth, also considering how online and offline behavior must be intertwined to avoid the perception of greenwashing.
- At the same time, the possibility of offline interaction—such as attending events to discuss climate policies—still seems to be on the table, even with companies that are heavily criticized by activists. Further studies could examine the relationship between perception and the effectiveness of different engagement methods (online or offline).

TABLE 1 | Tasks, barriers, and alternative functions for stakeholder engagement on social media.

Identified barriers to interaction on social media	Alternative functions to support tasks on social media	Critical tasks of stakeholder engagement in CSR	Theoretical connections
Posts are regarded as greenwashing; trustworthiness is key, but some companies seem more trustworthy than others	(1) Stakeholder engagement as an extension of the filter bubble	Strengthening the sustainability interests of stakeholders	Patzer et al. (2018)
	(1.1) Responsible agency in social media		Milli et al. (2025)
	(1.2) Being part of the climate (filter) bubble—finding allies		Miller et al. (2021)
Critical comments are ignored, but criticism is the main motivation to interact with companies online	(2) Stakeholder engagement as sensegiving to hashtags	Empowering stakeholders to act as intermediaries for nature and sustainable development	Castelló and Lopez-Berzosa (2023)
	(2.1) Pre-testing ideas before initiating "real-life" stakeholder engagement		Albu and Etter (2016)
	(2.2) Allowing (constructive) confrontation to soften the dialogic fronts		Schultz et al. (2013)
Fear of being instrumentalized, not wanting to support companies by sharing their posts	(3) Monitoring key concerns as a base for further stakeholder identification and selection	Creating mutual sustainability interests (in the long run)	Lane and Devin (2018)

5 | Conclusions

This study addressed the potential of social media interactions for stakeholder engagement in the context of CSR management. Drawing on the stakeholder perspectives by conducting nine interviews with climate activists, this study contributes to the practice of stakeholder engagement online. By providing a differentiated view, various functions of online stakeholder engagement were identified. The findings support that social media in its current form is not able to support stakeholder engagement in the stricter sense of Morsing and Schultz (2006).

However, even smaller interactions often suffer from a lack of trust and transparency. Based on the analysis of interviews under the lens of possible contribution to important tasks of stakeholder interactions for CSR, five potential functions of social media were identified: (1.1) responsible agency and (1.2) being part of the climate (filter) bubble—finding allies; (2.1) pre-testing ideas and (2.2) allowing (constructive) confrontation, to soften the dialogic fronts; and (3) monitoring key concerns. Table 1 summarizes the identified barriers in the context of stakeholder engagement and their critical tasks, as well as the five alternative functions of social media in the stakeholder engagement processes.

These five functions can provide a starting point for companies to think about social media strategies in the context of their CSR management. From a theoretical perspective, the application of the critical tasks according to Hörisch et al. (2014) has shown that more low-key forms of stakeholder engagement can be addressed even in the absence of "real" stakeholder dialogue on social media. This provides a basis for a broader definition of stakeholder engagement on commercialized social media. At the same time, this study emphasizes the importance of building trust, which seems to be better done in informal exchanges outside of social media. Further research should take this into account, especially concerning the relationships between online and offline stakeholder engagement and how they might influence each other.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix A

A.1 | Interview Guide (Translated From German)

Rationale:

The interviews should address four questions:

- How is Twitter functionalized by activists (only for campaigning, also for exchange)?
- How is the exchange with companies (online and offline) characterized and evaluated from the stakeholders' perspective (dialogic intention of stakeholders)?
- What role do social media play in exchanges with companies (relationship and, if applicable, interplay of online and offline communication)?
- How are tweets from companies perceived by FFF activists (impact/success factors), and how is the decision made as to how and whether to respond to them?

Introduction

Thank you very much for agreeing to give us an interview. We need your consent to record the interview.

I would now turn on the recorder and ask you again for your official consent to record and later also process the interview.

Consent and background:

a. Do you consent to us recording this interview?

Aim of the study: The study is part of my doctoral thesis, which is about digitalization and corporate sustainability management. This study aims to take a look at how companies interact with key stakeholders on Twitter. The interviews will be used to present the view of Fridays for Future activists as an important stakeholder group on the topic of interacting with companies on social media. This study will be conducted by a total of four researchers and with the help of two student assistants. The results of the study will later be submitted to a journal

for publication and published as part of the dissertation. All statements will be kept confidential. We may quote individual passages from the interview but only in anonymized form. The identity of the interviewees is only known to the leader of the study Silke Niehoff.

That's why I am asking you:

b. Do you agree that we use this interview in anonymized form for a purely scientific and noncommercial study?

c. Do you agree that we may quote and publish individual passages from the interview in anonymized form?

1. Demographic data

a. How old are you?

b. What is your occupation (working/pupil/student)?

2. Position Fridays for Future network/Twitter usage

a. How long have you been involved with FFF?

b. How would you describe your role in Fridays for Future?

c. Have you tweeted about the official FFF Twitter account?

3. Exchange with companies

a. FFF activists* have sometimes been invited by companies to speak before shareholder meetings, for example. What is your opinion about such invitations?

b. Should companies and climate activists cooperate to develop common goals and strategies?

c. On what occasions do you find it useful to exchange ideas with companies?

d. Is there a strategy or process within FFF that defines how exchanges with private sector companies should occur?

4. Twitter for FFF

a. What functions does social media have for you as an activist*?

i. Do you use social media differently based on purpose/function?

b. What role does social media specifically play in your interactions with businesses?

5. Impact/success factors

a. Do you interact with businesses on Twitter?

i. If yes, in what form?

ii. If no, why not?

b. Do you respond to tweets from companies that tag you? How do you decide what/how to respond?

c. Do you feel that companies actively seek to engage with you in an exchange via Twitter?

i. What specifically would you use to determine that?

ii. What would a tweet have to look like for FFF to respond to it?

iii. Can you think of specific positive/negative examples?

d. Are there other sharing formats (other than Twitter) with companies that you think would be more effective for FFF?

6. Online versus offline

ii. Has offline communication (such as face-to-face meetings) occurred as a direct result of an online exchange?

7. Do you know other people who might be able and willing to answer these questions?

A.2 | Code System First Round and Second Round (Translated From German)

1 Demographic data	0
1.1 Age	0
1.2 Occupation	0
1.2.1 Job	2
1.2.2 University	5
1.2.3 School	2
2 Position in the network	0
2.1 Duration of engagement	0
2.2 Role/responsibility in group	0
2.2.1 Founding member	1
2.2.2 Local and federal	2
2.2.3 No fixed responsibility	4
2.2.4 Organization/moderation	2
2.2.5 Social media	6
2.2.6 Public relations	5
2.3 Experience with official group social media account	0
2.3.1 No	1
2.3.2 Yes	8
3 Interactions with companies	0
3.1 Opinion on participation b. events, e.g., shareholder meetings	0
3.1.1 Danger of greenwashing	11
3.1.2 Opportunity for criticism	7
3.2 Cooperation between companies and climate activists?	0
3.2.1 Forcing to be heard	1
3.2.2 Companies with the same interests (RE provider): steer polit. disc.	1
3.2.3 Help companies transform	3
3.2.4 Other cooperation preferred (unions, trade unions)	6
3.2.5 Cooperate on concepts	3
3.2.6 More criticizing than cooperating	4
3.2.7 Only specific companies (ethical, sustainable, local)	4
3.2.8 No cooperation on the local level	1
3.3 Examples for meaningful exchange	0

3.3.1 Stakeholder processes/ participation (e.g., concrete planning procedures)	2
3.3.2 No consultancy	3
3.3.3 Incompatibility of positions/ industries as an obstacle to coop	1
3.3.4 With parts of the company, e.g., employees	1
3.3.5 Open discussions/panels/ shareholders' meetings	5
3.3.6 On specific topics, such as wind energy/regional topics	6
3.3.7 Support from companies (donation)	2
3.4 Fixed strategies/rules for cooperation with companies	1
3.4.1 Group actively seeks cooperation after internal voting	2
3.4.2 No strategies, consensus decision case-by-case basis	8
4 Social media uses by activists	0
4.1 Inform people	8
4.2 Exert pressure on decision-makers	7
4.3 Mobilize people	7
4.4 Generate media coverage	5
4.5 Improve the image local group	2
4.6 More important since COVID-19, strike online	1
4.7 Generating attention with others/finding allies	6
4.8 Agenda setting	1
4.9 Initiate and lead discourses	2
4.10 Affirmation	1
4.11 Discuss topics with own stakeholders	1
4.12 Posts adapted to different aims	7
4.13 Interaction with comp. on social media?	0
4.13.1 No interest on both sides	1
4.13.2 Yes, play a role	2
4.13.3 Only when companies' posts are not reinforced	1
4.13.4 Form of campaigning against corporate projects	10
4.13.5 Not much interaction with comp. on social media	11
4.14 Examples for interaction	0
4.14.1 Negative experience	6
4.14.2 Positive experience	4
5 Interacting with companies on Twitter	0
5.1 Yes, how?	0
5.1.1 Motivated companies interested in interaction	1
5.1.2 Companies want to be part of the climate bubble	4
5.2 No, why not?	0
5.2.1 Company tweets are not very controversial/only advertising	1
5.2.2 Criticism is ignored/not responded to	9
5.2.3 Company not geared towards interaction but towards sending	3
5.2.4 Defending against appropriation/generating attention f. comp.	6
5.3 Response/reaction to being tagged by a company?	0
5.3.1 Criticize greenwashing/ counter presentation	2
5.3.2 Contact attempts not to be taken seriously: only marketing	3
6 Perception of companies on social media (Twitter)	0
6.1 Do companies strive for interaction (pls. elaborate)?	0
6.1.1 No, no interest from the company side	10
6.2 What should a post that is answered look like?	0
6.2.1 Initiative generally open to dialogue	1
6.2.2 Only for raising attention for own purposes	2
6.2.3 Counter presentation when greenwashing or wrong facts	8
6.2.4 The right tone: not ingratiating, not insulting	2
6.2.5 Relevance of content	4
7 More effective formats of exchange?	0
7.1 Is online vs. offline more effective?	0
7.1.1 Online preferred	0
7.1.1.1 Young people look to social media first	1
7.1.1.2 Online for pressure/ attention	2
7.1.1.3 Online is more transparent	1

7.1.1.4 E-mail is more important than social media for interactions	2
7.1.2 Offline preferred	0
7.1.2.1 Online comm. creates misunderstandings	2
7.1.2.2 Offline without public, more open discussions	3
7.1.2.3 Offline for convincing	1
7.1.2.4 Offline/in-person with a basis of trust	2
7.1.2.5 Offline with gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice	2
7.1.2.6 Companies prefer offline interaction	2
7.1.2.7 Offline more productive/effective	3
7.1.3 Interaction offers limited benefits in general	2
7.2 Are online interactions and then offline interactions more likely?	0
7.2.1 No	2
7.2.2 As a reaction to a campaign (clean-up day)	2
7.2.3 Online pressure for appointments in real life	1
7.2.4 Campaigning leads to offline reaction	4

List of codes		Frequency
Code system		133
Empowering stakeholders to act as intermediaries for nature and		0
Alternatives for empowering	0	
Criticize greenwashing/counter presentation	2	
Defending against appropriation/generating attention f. comp.	6	
Forcing to be heard	1	
Opportunity for criticism	7	
Barriers to empowering		0
Only for raising attention for own purposes	2	
Contact attempts not to be taken seriously: only marketing	3	
Criticism is ignored/not responded to	9	
Companies are not geared towards interaction but towards sending	3	
Creating mutual sustainability interests		0
Alternatives for mutual interest		0
Relevance of content	4	
Companies want to be part of the climate bubble	4	
Motivated companies are interested in interaction	1	
Generating attention with others/finding allies	6	
On specific topics, such as wind energy/regional topics	6	
Open discussions/panels/shareholders' meetings	5	
Cooperate on concepts	3	
Help companies transform	3	
Barriers to mutual interest		32
Company tweets are not very controversial/only advertising	1	
Form of campaigning against corporate projects	10	
Only when the companies' posts are not reinforced	1	
No interest on both sides	1	
Incompatibility of positions/industries as an obstacle to coop.	1	
No consultancy	3	
No cooperation on the local level	1	
Only specific companies (ethical, sustainable, local)	4	
More criticizing than cooperating	4	
Other cooperation preferred (unions, trade unions)	6	
Strengthening the sustainability interests of stakeholders		0
Alternatives for new interests		0
Initiative is generally open to dialogue	1	
Companies with the same interests (RE provider): steer political discourse	1	
Initiate and lead discourses	2	
With parts of the company, e.g., employees	1	
Barriers to new interests		0
Danger of greenwashing	11	
Counter presentation when greenwashing or wrong facts	8	
The right tone: not ingratiating, not insulting	2	
Perception of companies on social media (Twitter)	0	
Do companies strive for interaction (pls. elaborate)?	0	
No, no interest from the company side	10	
What should a post that is answered look like?	0	