Strategic B2B brand activism: Building conscientious purpose for social impact

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Abstract

In the business-to-business (B2B) domain, brand activism is growing as a tool for attending to social problems and achieving brand differentiation. In this paper, we introduce B2B brand activism and conceive it as an emerging strategy that is enacted by firms within their supply chains and involves taking actions in relation to channel partners (e.g., firing professional services agencies, ceasing advertising spending with media outlets) based on the firm's avowed social and political purpose and values. We explore the 'accelerators' and 'decelerators' of B2B brand activism via in-depth interviews with B2B marketers. We find evidence for three main accelerators that expedite adoption of B2B brand activism, including (1) a need to maintain relevance via stakeholder communications, (2) an increased ability to track and use customer data, and (3) a need to respond to the power of end-consumers, B2B partners, competitors, and regulators. These accelerators exist alongside decelerators that restrain participation in purpose-driven practice— from (1) the need to ensure activism aligns with B2B purpose, to (2) the way marketers question their ability to enable long-term strategic change, and (3) a constant pressure to justify spending. We contribute to theory building by defining the conceptual framework for B2B brand activism.

Keywords

1. Introduction

As competition grows in the business-to-business (B2B) domain, firms seek to refine their B2B branding to signal quality and build stronger customer relationships. Brand activism – which refers to taking a stand on partisan issues such as gender and racial inequality via public speech or actions made by a firm using its corporate or individual brand (Moorman, 2020) – has proliferated in the consumer market. This practice is now likewise gaining relevance for B2B brands as a means to attend to social problems, create a shared vision, and achieve brand differentiation. This paper, therefore, formally introduces and conceptualizes B2B brand activism (Kapitan, Spry, Vredenburg, & Kemper, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). B2B brand activism equally involves firms using speech or actions to express support for or opposition to partisan issues based on the brand's social and political purpose and values. However, due to the different context (i.e., the supply chain, business transactions, sourcing contracts) and relationships (i.e., a partnership between two businesses), how and where B2B brand activism is enacted differs from the original incarnations of the strategy that employed marketing communications targeted at end consumers (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). For example, B2B brand activism is instead aimed to build a shared vision and competitive advantage among stakeholders in the B2B market (Guenther & Guenther, 2019). This activism is implemented by the firm in relation to its business partners (e.g., distributors, retailers, clients, buyers, etc.) and takes the form of actions such as boycotting or firing channel partners, removing products from shelves and content from online platforms, and terminating licensing contracts. In this work, we propose that alongside quality, efficiency and sustainable sourcing practices (Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019), B2B brands' decisions are increasingly driven by differentiation in social activism. However, the question remains how and when B2B marketers make decisions in support of solving social problems with and among their stakeholders.

Consider, for example, how global apparel and athletic brands Nike and H&M suspended use of cotton from the Chinese province of Xinjiang in 2021, in response to the alleged use of Uyghur Muslim forced labor in cotton production (Brant, 2021). Similarly, after Australian chef Pete Evans tweeted a neoNazi meme, publisher Pan Macmillan, cookware makers Baccarat and House, and retailers across Australasia removed Evans' cookbooks and kitchenware lines (Baj, 2020). Conscientious, participatory brands are increasingly seeking to respond to social problems in this emerging practice of B2B brand activism (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Iglesias, Landgraf, Ind, Markovic, & Koporcic, 2020; Kapitan et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). We adopt the term *B2B brand activism* to denote actions, such as innovations and operations, that support solving social problems which affect stakeholders while also fulfilling performance objectives. Actions add to B2B brand value as they reduce purchase risk for stakeholders (Guenther & Guenther, 2019; Srinistava, Shervani, & Fahey, 1998). Such actions may include removing product from shelves, terminating licensing or professional services contracts, removing content from questionable platforms, supporting employees, and renegotiating and/or terminating supplier sourcing that no longer aligns with the B2B brand's purpose (Kapitan et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Such actions are grounded in the emerging role of marketing as an arbiter of values, as perceived by individuals and institutions (Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018). Korschun, Martin, & Vadakkepatt (2020, p. 378) note that "marketing is concerned with the effects of business on society at large and also on the ways in which actors create, communication, deliver and exchange offerings that provide value." In B2B brand activism, these actions revolve around support for controversial or polarizing social causes from climate change and animal welfare to Black Lives Matter, abortion and antiracism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For instance, when Texas

legislators passed laws in 2021 outlawing abortion past 6 weeks gestation, B2B brands took action. Web hosting provider GoDaddy told Texas Right to Life to find a different provider for a site that invites anti-abortion supporters to report people who help women obtain abortions (Provenzano, 2021). Likewise, crowd-sourced business review site Yelp committed to pay employees for travel to access abortions and customer relationship management platform provider Salesforce offered to relocate employees out of Texas to seek better reproductive care (Novet, 2021).

As part of B2B brand value (Mudambi, 2002), customers and supply chain partners have come to expect disclosure and visibility in supply chain practice (Kapitan et al., 2020; Kraft, Valdes, & Zheng, 2018). They also expect B2B brands to be legitimate (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021). Such awareness began with sustainable brands and consumer watchdog groups wary of greenwashing (or making false or deceptive claims about green performance of products; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), leading to the rise of sustainable supply chain considerations (Kapitan et al., 2019). Yet this awareness now extends to social problems that affect B2B brand stakeholders (Kraft et al., 2018; Yawar & Seuring, 2017) from racial and gender inequality to immigration and voting rights. As one set of stakeholders, consumers increasingly put pressure on retailers and goods manufacturers to source from ethical, prosocial supply chains that support community and social impact (Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Tachizawa & Wong, 2015; Zhang, Zeng, Tse, Wang, & Smart, 2021). That is one driver putting "doing well by doing good" pressure on B2B brands (cf. Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018). Yet, stakeholders from customer firms to competitors likewise have increased demands for social activism. B2B brand purpose is now facing a paradox: 86% of B2B companies say purpose and values are key to their growth, but only 24% have implemented purpose in a strategic way to influence business and social outcomes via innovation, operations, and engagement with society (ANA, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

In this work, we make three main contributions. First, we build theory on B2B brand value and B2B brand legitimacy by defining and explaining a conceptual framework for B2B brand activism. We note a gap in the literature of B2B brand value positioning via corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental and social governance (ESG), sustainability, and building social innovation (De Silva, Khan, Vorley, & Zeng, 2020; Gupta, Kumar, & Karam, 2020; Kapitan et al., 2019; Lai, Chiu, Yang, & Pai, 2010; Pai, Lai, Chiu, & Yang, 2015; Paolone, Cucari, Wu, & Tiscini, 2021; Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). That is, much work touches on social impact, yet does not focus directly on how firms' response to social problems have become a tool for positioning. Social problems involve conditions (1) that a stakeholder group deems undesirable, (2) that threaten the well-being of a group as defined by group norms, or (3) that create collective adversity as evidenced by public opinion (Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018). In B2B brand activism, the goal is both to raise brand performance by enhancing value in a strategic way (Korschun et al., 2020), and to solve social problems (Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018).

Second, we identify the factors that accelerate and decelerate B2B brand activism. We add to and extend the literature around social activism in brands and supply chains in conscientious corporate brands (Iglesias & Ind, 2020), social problem solving and social innovation in firms (Gupta et al., 2020; Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018), and authentic brand activism (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, and more importantly, in the emerging arena of authentic brand activism and conscientious corporate brands, there is little scholarship exploring how B2B and supply chain organizations should build a purpose and what benefits they might gain from doing so (cf. Gupta et al., 2020). The present work answers the call to

further develop theory on corporate brands' shaping of and response to requests for social impact to lead B2B brand purpose in strategic action (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). We conduct depth interviews with B2B brand and B2B service brand practitioners. We find accelerators that increase the likelihood of B2B brand activism include (1) a need to maintain relevance via stakeholder communications, (2) an increased ability to track and use customer data, and (3) a need to respond to the power of end-consumers, B2B partners, competitors and regulators. These accelerators exist alongside three major decelerating forces that restrain participation in purpose-driven practice for social impact — from (1) the need to ensure activism aligns with B2B purpose, to (2) the way marketers feel challenged in their ability to enable long-term strategic change, and (3) pressure to justify spending.

In our third contribution, we build a toolkit of B2B brand activism as a strategic tool for B2B brand purpose. This is a novel approach to B2B brand purpose, as development has been relatively confined to management, strategy and leadership literature (Golob, Davies, Kernstock, & Powell, 2020; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Instead, we show how B2B marketers are actively involved in seeking to build purpose. We aim to uncover the strategic processes underpinning how B2B brand practitioners might implement actions, operations and engagement of stakeholders to solve social problems via a toolkit of strategic B2B brand activism (see Fig. 3). This also shows how B2B brand activism is emerging in forms that are both more and less strategic. Importantly, the more strategic the B2B brand activism, the more likely it is to yield long-term B2B brand purpose.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Business-to-business brands

Business-to-business (B2B) branding is evolving. Mudambi, Doyle, and Wong (1997) were among the first to show that the intangible attributes of an industrial product and firm play a key role in the decision-making process of buying center members. Price still plays a fundamental role in determining customer firms' purchase. Yet some B2B firms seek meaningful differentiation among industrial offerings with similar specifications and performance ratings (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Mudambi, 2002; Mudambi et al., 1997). B2B marketers have in this way learned to articulate their value to clients that are more brand-receptive than others (Mudambi, 2002). For buyers who seek to source sustainable, ethical and socially impactful goods and services, a clear B2B brand positioning can impact market performance.

First, B2B brands that articulate clear positioning and practice associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental, social and governance (ESG) perspectives have seen improvement in reputation and brand equity (Lai et al., 2010; Pai et al., 2015; Paolone et al., 2021; Tran & Nguyen, 2020). Second, B2B firms that pursue a sustainably superior positioning in environmental sustainable practices and operations likewise add value in terms of brand equity, reputation and performance (Kapitan et al., 2019; Vesal et al., 2021). Third, new market conditions that privilege B2B brand alliances with social innovation partners, such as nonprofits, drive greater purchase intent and a brand image of warmth and competence (Crisafulli, Dimitriu, & Singh, 2020; De Silva et al., 2020). Social innovations, also known as "doing well by doing good" innovations, can have profit-generating effects for firms that seek to alleviate social problems for specific stakeholders (Gupta et al., 2020; Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018).

Yet there is a clear gap in scholarly understanding around how to create a B2B brand purpose and how that can translate into brand value. The rise of social innovations as a positioning strategy, alongside rapid digitization of B2B services, transforms how firms are positioned among their stakeholders. This has fed the desire for B2B marketers to deploy unique resources, operations, and messaging to ensure differentiation and competitive advantage (Beverland et al., 2007; Vendrell-Herrero, Bustinza, Parry, & Georgantzis, 2017). The process might yield legitimacy for B2B organizations who weave narratives into their marketing to build brand reputation, awareness and credibility (Bonnin & Alfonso, 2019; Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021). However, it remains uncertain how the multiplicity of actors involved in B2B exchange, and the need for customer input to co-create a successful B2B experience (Guenther & Guenther, 2019) impacts brand value and reduces risk for brands that seek to build a B2B brand purpose.

We argue that activities, operations, communications and services that aim to address a social need for stakeholders are redefining B2B brand value. We seek to build theory in the present work, and propose that adopting a more (vs. less) strategic and long-term response to solve social problems further adds to the conceptualization of B2B brand value and brand purpose, and the legitimacy of a B2B brand's continued operation (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021; Mudambi et al., 1997). We next explore our framework for how B2B brand activism can offer brand value for business buyers.

2.2. B2B brand activism

Buyers already place importance on B2B brand attributes such as brand name awareness, distribution and support services, and brand image (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021; Mudambi, 2002). We propose B2B brand activism is an additional tool that marketers can use to craft their brand image and contribute to legitimate market performance. Drawing from this evolving literature, we build theory to demonstrate an emerging phenomenon of brand activism in B2B contexts. Formally, we define *B2B brand activism* as a brand's use of messaging or actions among their business partners to express support for or opposition to partisan issues based on the brand's social and political purpose and values. Messages and actions could include changes to practice, operations, and stakeholder engagement such as boycotting or firing channel partners, terminating licensing contracts, removing products from shelves and content from online platforms. Differing from initial conceptualizations of brand activism targeted to the end consumer (Vredenburg et al., 2020), B2B brand activism is a firm-initiated practice directed towards channel partners, serving the primary objective of meeting dual performance and social impact goals. B2B brand activism includes activist actions directed towards any business partner or stakeholder (e.g., distributors, retailers, clients, buyers, etc.) that take a stand, supporting or opposing partisan issues, thus impacting social causes and brand associations at the same time. The goal is to ultimately assist in achieving social impact while forming a positive brand image.

Given the right mix of marketing support and consumer willingness to adopt, social innovations can yield higher productivity and lower costs for firm and customer, alongside community benefits from social inclusion to health and the environment (Gupta et al., 2020). Yet these objectives cannot be met if B2B brands are not strategic in their approach to activism for social problem solving. In particular, we suggest that B2B brand activism is more strategic when such activism is proactive, intentional, and its enactment is tied to a conscientious B2B brand purpose and values as part of a long-term B2B brand strategy (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). B2B brand activism

is less strategic, and therefore less effective, when practice or messaging is reactive, performed in the absence of strategic, planned intention, and not clearly aligned with B2B purpose or values. To further underpin the theoretical conceptualization of B2B brand activism, we next explore the literature on drivers of B2B brand value, B2B brand legitimacy and the application of brand activism to firms' social problem-solving.

2.3. Drivers of B2B brand value

Transactions in industrial markets tend to be risky and fraught due to macro-economic factors, technological shifts and political changes (Srinistava et al., 1998). Branding can be deployed to help reduce purchase risk and build more clear relationships between clients, buyers and providers (Srinistava et al., 1998). The value of B2B branding emerges for firms when branding can signal quality and reduce the perceived risk of transactions, and as a result increase cash flow advantages (Guenther & Guenther, 2019). There is much scholarly interest in linking social innovation and conscientious practices to this conceptualization of B2B brand value (Iglesias and Ind, 2020; Gupta et al., 2020;Kapitan et al., 2019; Vesal et al., 2021). Responsible supply chain practices are one arena that shows clear operational change. From communication among partners and compliance with regulatory and social standards to supplier development, responsible supplier practice emerges as one way to fulfil brand purpose and raise value for firms (Yawar & Seuring, 2017). How to articulate and measure performance of socially responsible B2B brand practices has likewise occupied recent scholarship. That includes work on social innovations (Zhang et al., 2021), sustainably superior B2B brand positioning (Kapitan et al., 2019; Wiese, Kellner, Lietke, Toporowski, & Zielke, 2012), and increasing visibility along with disclosure to reduce uncertainty about supplier practices (Kraft et al., 2018).

In order to deliver on this value, B2B brands seek to cultivate customers receptive to their offerings. Firms that seek improved market performance from an image of B2B brand sustainability or CSR, for instance, gain the most from customers whose values align (Lai et al., 2010; Tran & Nguyen, 2020; Vesal et al., 2021). Because of this gain, B2B brands are continually seeking to grow a market base that aligns with their purpose. This alignment helps ensure brand image translates to market performance. For instance, sustainably superior B2B brands continue to seek— via educational workshops, training and informational campaigns— to shift customer firms' attitudes towards more consideration of environmental concerns and operational challenges to sustainability (Kapitan et al., 2019; Vesal et al., 2021).

It is likewise important for B2B brands to measure and defend tangible practice to support their brand value. The growing ESG perspective measures social responsibility as a comparison of sustainability, social concerns, human rights and consumer protection. From a firm-level perspective, governance includes providing for stakeholder needs and employee relations (Ferrell, 2021). B2B brand value for clients emerges most clearly when industrial brands first embrace operational changes (governance pillar), and then environmental and social pillars (Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014; Paolone et al., 2021). Ferrell (2021, p. 143) refers to social issues "including opportunities to improve the quality of life." Yet it is unclear from the literature how a B2B brand that embraces the social pillar in the ESG view, via treatment of business partners and stakeholders, impacts firm performance.

Institutional theory scholarship provides one explanation for how socially activist operational decisions can be an effective strategic tool. Brands are in a fight to retain legitimacy among stakeholders, which allows organizations to appear appropriate and thereby continue to

operate and gain access to resources (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021; Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006; Martin-de Castro, 2021). A social stance can help B2B brands gain more legitimacy, awareness, and stronger positioning in a heavily interconnected marketing system (Korschun et al., 2020). Institutional theory posits that the need to remain legitimate can drive organizations to adopt a given set of practices (Scott, 2014). Incongruence between norms and values of an organization and society can lead to a legitimacy deficit, making it "susceptible to claims that it is negligent, irrational or (at least in its current form) unnecessary" (Sillince & Brown, 2009, p.1830). In this vein, organizations gain stability, survival, and institutional legitimacy when they imitate the behavior of those operating in the same institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizations can be pressured to ensure legitimacy through three forces: coercive (i.e., law), normative (i.e., moral compliance) and mimetic (i.e., adoption of widely accepted practices in the same industry; Kolk & Perego, 2010). This a compelling driver for B2B brands. Neo-institutional theory suggests that ensuring legitimacy is the key reason why organizations adopt sustainable reporting (Martínez-Ferrero & García-Sánchez, 2017) and CSR practices (Filatotchev & Nakajima, 2014).

B2B activists who seek to enact innovations to solve social problems in their supply chains ahead of coercive regulations often seek moral compliance (Kolk & Perego, 2010) on a specific social cause. Take the organization that seeks to terminate supply chain contracts associated with unfair labor practices for marginalized communities, as Nike, H&M, Burberry and Patagonia did with cotton from Xinjiang (Brant, 2021). First-movers in the B2B brand activism space thus act normatively to maintain legitimacy via moral compliance among stakeholders, including suppliers. However, as the action encourages competitors and their suppliers to likewise discontinue manufacturing partnerships with questioned labor practices, B2B brand activism creates mimetic pressure (Kolk & Perego, 2010) that encourages adoption of the practice industry-wide. As Gustafson and Pomirleanu (2021, p. 29) note, "Some brands become the 'standard' for specific issues (i.e., sustainability, humane, honest), defining and driving practices, products, and manner of interactions, that other competitors, customers and other actors take for granted these standards."

Only recently has work for corporate and B2B brands begun to address the role of articulating value in an informed, careful and conscientious way (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021; Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Iglesias et al. (2020) show how corporate brand identity is co-created among stakeholders who perform key roles to communicate, internalize, contest, and elucidate meaning. Gustafon and Pomirleanu (2021) deepen this literature with a clear framework that depends on network-, community-, group- and individual-level conversations to source legitimacy that yields B2B brand credibility, awareness and reputation outcomes. In this way, brand positioning around B2B brand activism can shape responses within a broader network.

2.4. Brand activism for social problems

Conscientious organizations embark on an ongoing conversation that evolves within and beyond the control of marketing management and is responsible for articulating brand meaning (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Making room for suppliers, partners and other stakeholders to build and share meaning through practices is an emergent field for conscientious corporate brands.

That site of meaning, however, is contested in the realm of social problem-solving and social activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Whereas CSR activities are generally viewed as beneficial by society (i.e., donations to charitable organizations such as child welfare and cancer research; Wettstein & Baur, 2016), brand activism typically involves adopting a non-neutral stance on potentially divisive social issues for which there is not a clear appropriate response. Accordingly, brand activism tends to be more controversial and polarizing (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck, & Watson, 2020; Korschun et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Nike, H&M, Burberry and Patagonia discontinued use of some of the highest-grade cotton in the world from China's Xinjiang province in response to allegations of forced labor by the Muslim Uyghur community (Brant, 2021). Yet this operational change for social problem solving was controversial, as it inspired the backlash of many in China, leading to severed contracts with social influencers and products removed from stock on major e-commerce shelves in China.

Social innovations include any instrument for creating lasting social change. 'Doing well by doing good' involves implementation or modifications by a firm of a product, process or practice to benefit firm performance and society by "aiding in the alleviation of a social problem" (Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018, p 226). Much of the literature to date examines social problem solving innovations for bottom-of-the pyramid customers from emerging markets (Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018), for B2B brands that form strategic alliances (Babu et al., 2020; Crisafulli et al., 2020; De Silva et al., 2020) and for social innovations driven by high-tech firms (Gupta et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Social problems, however, are broader than just this lens, and attempts to respond might not be welcomed by all stakeholders. As defined by Varadarajan and Kaul (2018, p. 226), social problems are "defined by group mores" and include "collective difficulties that exist, in the opinion of the public at large or some constituent group of the public." For B2B brand activism then, actions such as innovations in operations and engagement might address social problems perceived as "undesirable" for some stakeholders yet that prove controversial for others outside that public or group.

B2B brand activism for social problem solving is implemented by the firm in relation to its business partners (e.g., distributors, retailers, clients, buyers, etc.) who need to negotiate a myriad of ethical, financial, practical and human concerns to arrive at changes that resonate with customers (Gupta et al., 2020; Roberts, 2003). Negotiated changes in operations can result in added value and shared costs along the supply chain (Gupta et al., 2020; Vendrell-Herrero et al., 2017). Costs in terms of resources (i.e., advertising and marketing campaigns, employee training) can be higher at first, yet can be adapted at scale to avoid future costs stemming from inaction (such as threat of regulation or loss of suppliers; Finch, Horan, & Reid, 2015). However, these risks can be rewarded with market performance if B2B organizations can remain legitimate and competitive (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021; Martin-de Castro, 2021). But what remains unclear is how firms work with suppliers and other business partners to enact responses to social problems, and what decision makers on the ground experience when faced with the opportunity to react or become proactive in the face of social problem solving demands from stakeholders.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

The main purpose of this study is to explore how B2B brand activism can become an emerging tool for B2B brand value, and explore the development of B2B brand activism as a strategic tool to build B2B brand purpose. We sought to answer three key research questions: (1) What factors drive the adoption of B2B brand activism? (2) What tactics, tools and strategies are used in B2B brand activism? And (3) What factors help or hinder the adoption of B2B brand activism?

As little is known about this phenomenon, rich and detailed data was required (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Thus, we adopted an exploratory qualitative research method. B2B researchers adopt qualitative methods in exploring the experiences, practices and behaviors of managers and organizational actors (La Rocca, Hoholm, & Mørk, 2017). Following Poblete and Bengtson (2020), our goal was to investigate the phenomenon in its natural setting through the perspective of the participating actors and identify the dimensions involved in B2B brand activism. Thus, to explore brand activism in the B2B context, we adopt a qualitative phenomenology approach (Sandberg, 2000). A phenomenology approach utilizing in-depth interviews is a means to dig deep into participants' lived work experiences (Patton, 1990; Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998). A phenomenology approach is often adopted in B2B research when there is a lack of understanding of a phenomenon (Waseem, Biggemann, & Garry, 2018), especially to identify the "essential components of phenomena" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.8). This approach allows individual perspectives in their unique contexts (i.e., different B2B roles) to be explored and a natural emergence of how things (like B2B brand activism) appear in practice (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Interviewees were the primary unit of analysis (Dortins, 2002), with our analysis focused on the phenomena of B2B brand activism (Poblete & Bengtson, 2020).

3.2. Data collection

We use semi-structured in-depth interviews to interview marketing managers working in the supply chain and/or professional service brands of B2B organizations in New Zealand. This is because we sought organizational decision makers in a setting that is highly competitive and that forces B2B marketers to differentiate and create clear value for their buyers (Mudambi, 2002). The New Zealand business sector is host to a network of early adopter entrepreneurial firms that exhibit high openness to new ideas, as confirmed by the country's placement at the top of the World Bank The World Bank (2020) Doing Business Report. B2B professional services and supplier firms form 34.6% of the business sector overall in New Zealand. Yet, those sectors saw both 39.3% of new enterprises launched in 2020 and 40.6% of businesses to fail in 2020 (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). Only 37% of all starts-ups exist after two years in New Zealand, as compared to 80% in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Statistics New Zealand, 2020). These figures indicate there is pressure among firms to quickly find and communicate clear competitive advantage. For the purposes of this research, the agility of the New Zealand business sector renders brand differentiation even more valuable as a way to create competitive advantage for B2B brands (Mudambi, 2002).

A convenience and purposive sample were used to select participants. A convenience sample is drawn from a source(s) that is conveniently accessible to the researcher(s), while a purposive sample selects participants whose characteristics (i.e., knowledge, experience) are relevant to the study. In practice, this meant that the authors' industry network was utilized and participants were identified and contacted due the richness of information that they could provide based on the research objectives (i.e., brand activism involvement) (Ritchie & Lewis,

2003). Specifically, marketers whose brands operate with supply chain partners as suppliers, manufacturers, or distributors were selected on the following criteria: (1) operating in business-to-business exchanges, (2) actively shaping the messaging and/or practice of the brands they work for in or are contracted to work with, and (3) based in New Zealand. B2C brand activism suggests messaging or communication is the most visible part of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The sampling approach enabled a deep understanding of B2B activism through diverse viewpoints.

The first and second author approached industry network acquaintances via email or LinkedIn messages to arrange and then conduct interviews. Overall, 22 industrial marketers were approached who were either acquaintances of the research team or recommended by industry contacts, though seven declined due to time commitments. When approached, informants were asked about their willingness to be interviewed about the role (if any) of social problems in their firms' decision making. They participated in exchange for knowledge sharing of overall findings when the study was concluded. The researchers who conducted the interviews each have more than a decade of practice in conducting and interviewing informants in qualitative research.

Fifteen interviews were conducted in total, 10 with marketers in B2B services brands (Coleman, de Chernatony, & Christodoulides, 2011) and five with marketers in B2B industrial brands in the supply chain (Herbst & Merz, 2011). Thirteen interviews were conducted in-person at the participants' workplace, and two were conducted at the researchers' offices or a quiet coffee shop. All interviews conducted are included in the data analysis. Table 1 shows the characteristics of these participants and their firms. The number of interviews conducted in B2B research can depend on availability of participants, topic of inquiry and theoretical saturation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Our research approach considered the latter to inform our data collection approach.

Table 1. Participants.

Pseudonym	Role	Years' experience	Supply chain role	Firm size
Graham	Founding partner	28 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Kimberly	Account director	21 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Kelly	Marketing manager	17 years	Distributor	150+ employees
Tara	Account director	9 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Anna	Creative	10 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Brad	Creative	7 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Georgia	Marketing head	21 years	Distributor	101–150 employees
Harry	Marketing head	22 years	Distributor	21–50 employees

Pseudonym	Role	Years' experience	Supply chain role	Firm size
Hannah	Media strategist	4 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Sam	Creative director	16 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
James	Account director	14 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Andrew	Marketing head	3 years	Supplier	1–20 employees
Elizabeth	Account director	15 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Bryan	Strategy director	14 years	B2B services brand	50–100 employees
Chris	Marketing manager	18 years	Distributor	101–125 employees

Data collection continued until additional interviews did not provide new insights into the subject studied (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), also known as the point of theoretical saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In practice, this means we stopped interviewing once no new themes were identified or reorganization of coding was required (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Saturation means the sampling procedure focuses less on sample size and more on sampling adequacy whereby depth and breadth of information is important (Bowen, 2008). Our data collection was iterative, first eight interviews were conducted and an initial data analysis was conducted. We then collected an additional three interviews to identify whether data saturation had been reached. Seeing this was not the case, an additional four interviews were conducted. Data analysis at this stage revealed saturation. Thus, once data saturation was achieved at the 15th interview, data collection was halted (Saunders et al., 2018). Overall, the number of interviews was sufficient for the objectives of the study, offering interesting and unique insights.

3.3. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the data collection method to allow an understanding of experiences of B2B brand activism in practice (Patton, 1990; Remenyi et al., 1998). Interviews are the most common form of qualitative method used in *Industrial Marketing Management,* which demonstrates its versality and preference among B2B researchers (Lindgreen, Di Benedetto, Thornton, & Geersbro, 2021). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 min. The interview guide (Appendix 1) consisted of five overarching questions around the suitability and appropriateness of engaging with social or political causes. The first part of the interview guide discussed attitudes around brands becoming involved with social or political causes as part of their marketing and advertising efforts. The next part of the guide raised questions around the process of brands getting involved with a social or political cause, about specific views on becoming involved with causes, and about how each participant decides what social causes a brand should engage with. To lessen social desirability, the interviewers built rapport with participants so they would feel comfortable expressing their true feelings and probing for more information, especially when there were cues that social desirability responses may be occurring (i.e., vague answers, denial of problem, inconsistencies) (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Interviews were audio-recorded and

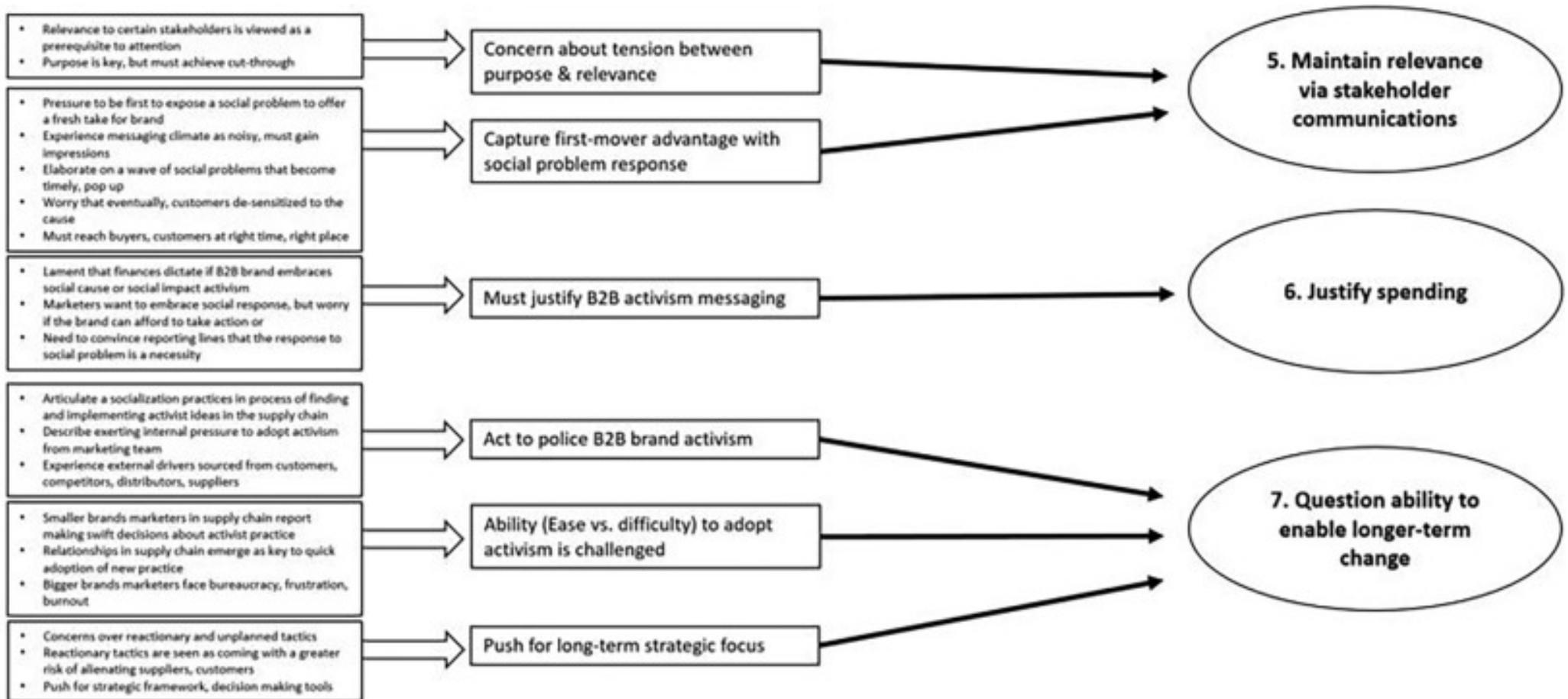| 1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
• Social media, social listening as tactics • Test and learn to fund bigger campaigns • Partnerships, events & activations as change agents • Digital first leads traditional reach • Leverage effect to build brand narrative	Use digital-first tactics for customers	**1. Demand change along the supply chain**
• Sever relationships with supplier, distributors who do not align with social response • Affirm shared values & cost sharing for innovations with social impact • Renegotiate contracts or RFPs for new B2B partners • Collaborate with groups that fund the cause • Fund social impact projects via % of license fee • Demand social response from supply chain partners	Put pressure on supply chain partners	
• Strategic decision framework needed for response to social causes in supply chain as they arise • Avoid hard sell push on B2B activism • Focus on practice first to build long-term • Debate over immediate vs. no messaging	Experience tension between reactionary vs. brand-building strategy	**2. Ensure activism aligns with B2B brand values and purpose**
• Social impact practice/message from values • Only take action if part of brand ethos, value, DNA • Brand as teacher, role model for social impact	Drive to be authentic -- must align with purpose, values of brand	
• Preference for practice (vs. messaging) in B2B activism • Good way to get noticed, but must justify • Risky if no or little history of social impact work	Worry that B2B activist messaging & content is risky	
• Purpose-driven as way to differentiate the brand • Pressure from customers to be activist in supply chain • Pressure from suppliers, distributors, government • Pressure from competitors to position as activists	Feel that social activism as necessary, required, expected	
• Brands must account for their claims • Customers can detect inauthenticity and lies • Customers empower brands and brands are beholden to them	Fear of customer power to lift or destroy brands	**3. Respond to power of customers, regulators, partners & competitors**
• Consumer culture must be digested, understood • Question the role of a B2B brand in culture • Clear experience of expected activism on social causes • Consumers will call out, boycott, even in supply chain	Acknowledge that customers force re-evaluation of B2B brand	
• End-users buy things with purpose and values • End-consumers hold brands accountable for the values they say they have and accept • Pressure for brands in the supply chain to clarify core values and take action based on those values	Seek to maintain relationships with buyers, partners	
• Operate platform and data to determine consumer values • Use data within the supply chain to get concessions • Struggle with how to break the algorithm	Mine data for values, social problems to respond to and support	**4. Track and use customer data**
• Part of job is live, dynamic interpretation & constant checking • Use social listening as a key tool • Deep dive into data to draw interpretations	Operate continuous tracking & monitoring of customer purchase process	

Fig. 1. Study concepts, themes, and aggregate dimensions from thematic analyses (Gioia et al., 2013).

transcribed for a total of 152 typed, single-spaced pages. Participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used to replace participants' names in interview transcripts. Use of pseudonyms in this way helped to ensure anonymity and mitigate potential social desirability bias.

3.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed via inductive thematic analysis (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). In thematic analysis there is a search for themes that are important to form a description of any particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This entailed an iterative process of reading and structuring the interview transcripts to examine, compare, and categorize the data through open coding. Gioia et al.'s (2013) systematic inductive technique was followed, which is commonly used in B2B qualitative research (Kamalaldin, Linde, Sjödin, & Parida, 2020; Peters, Ivens, & Pardo, 2020) whereby first, second and third (aggregate) order themes are identified. In the inductive data analysis process, findings can be linked to more rigorous theoretical development via the generation of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (see Fig. 1). The coding process was implemented as follows.

First, we focused on reading interview transcripts several times, and marking common words, phrases, terms and sentences related to the overarching research objective. The process of initial coding identified first-order categories of codes, which express the experiences and views of the informants in their own words (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Gioia et al., 2013). In this study, the first and second author generated 60 total first-order themes, shown in the data structure (see Fig. 1). Second, the coders built on the first-order categories and further analyzed the transcripts to uncover links and patterns. Through examining the first-order categories, we started to combine them to form second-order themes which represented theoretically distinct concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). In this way, the higher order of abstraction in the 2nd order themes helps reveal the reasoning, or the 'why' behind the findings, identifying links and patterns between 1st-order categories. Our analysis found 17 s-order themes. Lastly, another still-higher level of abstraction in the coding took place, through the generation of aggregate dimensions (Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Following standard procedures and to increase trustworthiness, we used previous research insights to guide the formation of theoretically rooted dimensions (Einola, Kohtamäki, Parida, & Wincent, 2017; Kamalaldin et al., 2020). In the analysis of the themes, we evaluated different theoretical frameworks but did not find it fit into one, instead, drawing on several research areas such as conscientious branding and social innovation, and theories such as stakeholder theory and institutional theory. We identified seven aggregate dimensions (Fig. 1), which "represent a theoretically and empirically grounded categorization" (Kamalaldin et al., 2020, p. 313).

To ensure trustworthiness, two authors independently coded the data and any discrepancies in coding were discussed. Continual discussions took place to understand the relationships between codes and themes. Confidence in the findings can be increased (Marton, 1986) through the "iterative process of examination, reflection, critique, and modification by the researchers," as well as discussions of the interpretations of the data (cross-checking; Dewsnap, Micevski, Cadogan, & Kadic-Maglajlic, 2020, p.294), which is considered a form of validation. The findings below also offer 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) providing guidance about how and why events occur. The audit trail (i.e., coding process, sampling procedure) discussed in the sections above also provide greater trustworthiness (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). As a form of peer debriefing, we also presented the preliminary findings of the study at various academic conferences and industry presentations (Long & Johnson, 2000). Fig. 1 displays the coding results.

4. Findings

We found seven aggregate dimensions (see Fig. 1) that explain the phenomenon of B2B brand activism and the drivers and barriers to its strategic implementation. The findings give rise to a sense of faster versus slower adoption of the practice, thus, we term these dimensions as accelerators or decelerators of B2B brand activism. We note the way participants described the concepts and their relationship to either enabling activism in the supply chain (accelerators) or inhibiting and slowing uptake of activism in the supply chain (decelerators). Fig. 2 shows the overarching relationship between the seven dimensions. These dimensions will be discussed in depth below, starting with B2B brand activism itself, followed by accelerators and decelerators.
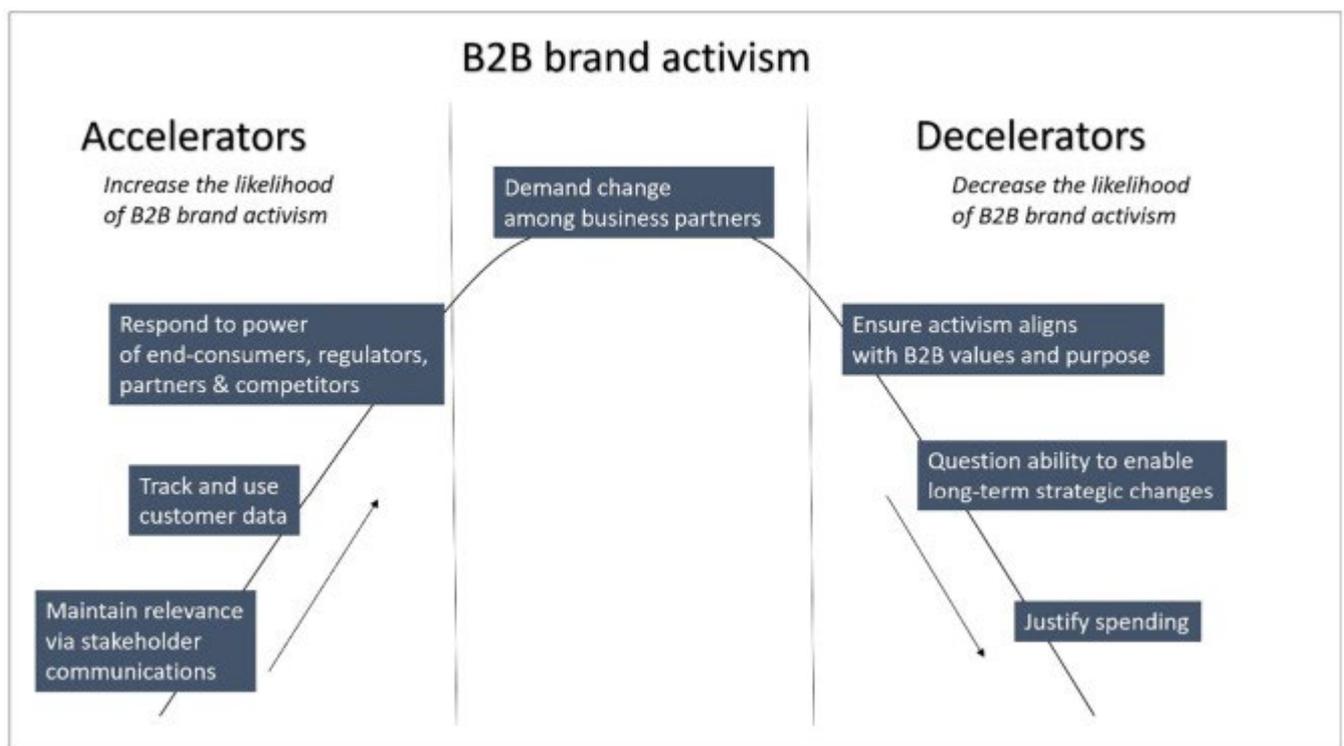

Fig. 2. Accelerators and decelerators of B2B brand activism.

4.1. B2B brand activism: Marketers demand change among business partners

Marketing managers described putting pressure on their suppliers and/or clients to meet their goals for social impact during both regular contracted work and contract re-negotiations. As such, this is how the phenomenon of B2B brand activism is articulated by our participants. Participants viewed B2B brand activism though the lens of actions, innovations and

operational changes that support solving social problems. Importantly, participants also stressed the need to perform well while pushing for social change. Much of this activism took the form of conversations and modelling for the marketers involved in activism.

"We entered talks and with two or three other suppliers. But I believe we went with our main packaging provider and went, 'you need to find us a solution.' 'Cause then it makes them change the way they do business, right?" (Harry).

Manufacturers exploring new avenues describe receiving large dossiers from distributors on climate change strategy and distributors describe pushing back consumer demands on suppliers. In another example, during Black Lives Matter protests, one marketing manager in a manufacturing firm reported surprise to see a design from a label supplier that included an angry black food item. That seemed particularly ignorant of the cultural moment, he said:

"So we went back to them and said 'Hey, what is your review process? Because I don't know if you guys are on social media, this is probably not a good thing to roll out right now.' I felt they need to be a little bit more responsible and be aware of these things that are going on" (Andrew).

From transport suppliers to labelling to production to distributors who also share values, participants describe alignment in the B2B relationship as key to their success in achieving social impact goals. They may implement this through short- or long-term actions such as severing contracts or renegotiating contracts with suppliers and distributors, new contracts, seeking new supply chain partners whose values align, waiving fees to support local suppliers, and removing stock for sale.

4.2. Accelerator: Respond to the power of the end-consumer, regulators, and competitors

There is a sense of consumer power that brands, advertisers, and even those in the supply chain are "answerable to me, the consumer" (James). External pressure emerged as accelerants for all B2B organizations in the supply chain to adopt B2B brand activism. Most importantly, some form of activism and social impact is not merely expected by customers but is seen as required in order to do business, even in the supply chain. Doing nothing is perceived as worse than doing something. As Georgia noted, "not acting is actually acting, 'cause you could upset more people by not acting. So that may not be an option for us."

Participants exhibited both awe and dread as they described the rise of the power of customers. For any marketing actions to resonate, they must align with customer values as well as brand values, from the manufacturing stage on through suppliers and distributors. End-consumers and B2B customers have power on social media to scrutinize, call out, and boycott, but also have the power to empower brands when messaging truly aligns with practice.

"Let's go and point the finger at this company. 'What are you guys doing about it?' Yeah, but then it's saying 'well, you're not gonna make money 'cause we're not gonna buy your thing because [we] don't like what you're doing,' so it's forcing that change" (Andrew).

There is a real sense that customer values are driving the expectation, the external pressure for brands in the supply chain to clarify their own values and take action based on those

values. Chris calls this "making sure that we have our house in order as well." Values and brand purpose are thus the driving force from which a brand can act, and actions taken in the name of social impact must align with values and messaging to pass the consumer "smell bulls**t" test (Tara). In order to avoid this criticism, participants talked about utilizing influencer marketing to enhance storytelling and brand narrative, livestream e-commerce and key opinion leaders, use of more video on social media to capture attention and appeal to new customer demands and norms (i.e., the rise of Tiktok, a social media platform for creating, sharing and discovering short videos) as well as owned brand pages on social media (to create communities) and use of search engine optimization (SEO) and the pay-per-click online advertising platform Google AdWords. There was still a place for more traditional media and communication strategies such as public relations, sponsorship, earned media, out of home, events creations and relying on positive word of mouth.

B2B marketers also name government pressure on social issues as real threats that forced early or timely adoption of prosocial and political actions, such as replacing single-use plastics in the supply chain or adopting climate change initiatives. Competitive rivalry between and among suppliers, as an astute external pressure, is also part of the process that reinforces moments of integration of social impact into supply chain. When one fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) brand adopted recycled plastic molds, it both empowered local suppliers and outmaneuvered competitors who might face supply chain shortages or increased shipping costs for non-local production. Such external pressures appear as prime motives that drive decision making around strategic B2B brand activism.

"Number one, we don't want to be, we don't want to be caught late as in so late that the government mandates that plastic straws are to be wiped out, so that would that would be terrible. Number two, you don't want to be so late that you can't get a supply of an alternative. Number three, you don't want to be so late that everyone else has done it other than you. And number four, it really was just the right thing to do" (Harry).

In this way, a few participants saw B2B brand activism as a clear way to strategically protect themselves, their suppliers, and their distributors for the future.

4.3. Accelerator: Track and use customer data

Brands, marketing managers, and professional services agencies are operating with ever increasing customer tracking effectiveness. This can yield insights into how customers are behaving, what they are doing, what they are thinking, and what they are feeling. Participants discussed how marketers must be savvy to the "current cultural psychosis" (Kelly) and use what they learn about consumers to get ahead of strategic practice in a meaningful way. There is a two-way dialogue as customers influence each other, a conversational flow that means people will call inauthentic practices out. Participants report they constantly monitor and mine data for values and causes that might connect with their audiences (i.e., social media threads); in fact, there is "a whole data machine behind it" (Hannah). So, for any activist action to resonate, it must align with customer values as well as brand values. That's how brands can stay legitimate. Customers and their data trails are positioned here as the single biggest external driver for B2B brand activism uptake. Social listening, which is a research process for understanding online conversations among relevant audiences about their thoughts and feelings about a brand and its offerings, allows continuous tracking and monitoring of social values and causes to support.

"You can literally see what everybody is talking about and you can bring it right down to your region. Picking up your city, like your corner of your city. What are people talking about? What's trending on Twitter? What's the long term conversation looking like and then you go: Oh people really care about this. They care about fast fashion. They care about ethical sourcing. They care about sustainable production. S**t OK, now what do? We do what's our flex? What's our pivot?" (Kelly).

This social listening was highlighted to occur in three ways: broad assumptions and general demographics in a top-down manner, polling and careful research in a bottom-up manner, and finally audience data (tactics such as clicks and likes on Facebook). Participants showed how attuned they were to content matching audience demands, which was assessed through data mining and social sentiment analysis culture and through a test-and-learn (via A/B testing) strategy. There is a high level of complexity as the use of data is not one-time and static, instead, it is live and involves dynamic interpretation. Participants describe how they then use aggregated data insights to gain concessions and buy-in from supply chain partners. The goal emerged to disperse the costs and share the risks of activism for social impact with their clients and suppliers. For instance, one distributor used data about consumer preferences to renegotiate a better contract for new materials from an existing supplier. However, focusing too much on data was also suggested to serve as a blindfold to what brands really need to work on to better position for social impact: Their own core values and practice.

4.4. Accelerator: Maintain relevance via stakeholder communications

Get there faster. Be the first to jump on it. Be culturally relevant. These are three continual threads from participants about achieving cut-through and gaining attention from target audiences, whether that be end-consumers or supply chain partners. The ways to accomplish this varied, and though all mentioned some form of brand purpose or engagement with social causes, all participants seemed to emphasize relevance as a prerequisite for entry into the customers' attentional sphere. For these marketers, relevance drives the brand message forward, before even a consideration of purpose, and helps to ensure brands stay legitimate in the eyes of stakeholders.

The process leads to a cycle in which social problems "pop their heads up" (Sam) in positioning and cycle through marketers' tactics. B2B marketers have to be able to keep up with themes that cycle through the advertising and cultural radar in ebbs and flows. Participants mentioned topics from racial equality, gender equality and #metoo, to water, waste, fast fashion, climate change and sustainable sourcing. Once the first brand seizes on a relevant supportive stance however, other brands jump on board with a "just close your eyes and swing at the cause" approach (Brad).

As the push for social impact consideration in marketing practice grows, marketers in the supply chain emphasize the need to evolve beyond reactionary tactics. Because of these overlapping external pressures, B2B brand activism for social impact must accompany a clear strategy so that brands are not merely reacting, moving from one topic to the next. That involves change management processes in the supply chain, from manufacturer to end-consumer. Importantly, this is about long-term conversation within and for brands and their partner and supplier firms. In addition, it involves collaborating with consumer-facing brands, government and non-profits, non-governmental organizations, or charities that fund or support the cause. In the short term this may involve more traditional partnerships with government and non-profits or brands already known for cause activism.

"It's not just as simple as changing a straw yeah, or changing a plastic bag or you know, changing the color and a source. There's a, there's a whole supply chain and operations business that's affected, so you gotta take it into account the entire business. And have that change management happening" (Harry).

Participants saw a tension between short-term tactics and long-term brand building, a rift clearly exposed in the debate around adopting social impact into B2B brand positioning. Elizabeth, whose role in a B2B services brand has her constantly analyzing the strategic positioning of other brands, notes that social movements have "a tactical place" that is "more like the brand punchy[1] kind of stuff." However, that is not long term for many brands. Instead, what is advocated is not the intention to get noticed or recognized but participating and changing practice (or suppliers) because it's the right thing to do. The long-term approach builds a brand, but it's a longer-term and more strategic process as social impact is woven into the story of a brand.

"[The brand] never intended for going viral or to our media, see. We just did what we think you know we should be doing and none of those actions were with the aim that we want to be picked up and build our brand, and it just sort of fell organically" (Georgia).

"[P]eople have moved from all, 'You're just trying to sell a lot of cheap stuff' to 'Your stuff is really good' and 'Oh my God, I didn't realize you guys did all of this in the community and for the environment' and like the narrative, the cultural contextual narratives change so much, and it's simply because we've been putting more out into the world around [our] partners and around what we're doing" (Kelly).

B2B brand activism in this climate thus emerges as a clear way to strategically strengthen the organization itself, their suppliers, and their distributors going forward. It's about survival in the marketplace, says Andrew, "…so it's sort of being ahead of the game."

4.5. Decelerator: Ensure activism aligns with B2B values and purpose

All participants discussed how B2B brand activism creates meaningful conversations around business and brand purpose. The participants reported feeling a need to create meaningful conversations, both with marketing channel partners and with customers who carry the brand story forward. But to have these meaningful conservations, participants spoke of practice first, before messaging. It is only once an organization has practiced or embedded the socio-political issue that then can B2B brand activism have an action element, the findings show, pushing back on a supply chain partner to actually do something (a call to action).

Participants saw B2B brand activism as necessary for all businesses but saw it still as a risky and fraught process. The risk they saw comes in the form of customer skepticism and transparency in the supply chain, and fragmented supplier relationships as well as social media backlash that may follow when customers do not believe firms are being authentic. The risk also comes when the media and mainstream consumers pick up on the activism; participants questioned whether this leads to sensationalism or amplification. For example, participants discussed how organizations can achieve amplification via public relations and media channels, but if B2B brands don't have clear values and aren't able to articulate those values, they end up "trend jacking"[2] (Kelly) and appearing less authentic.

Due to this perceived risk, participants reported there is an emphasis on 'quieter' social innovations in the supply chain and demonstrating that the brand itself is changing practice. However, many were concerned there is still risk if the B2B brand has yet to have a history of social impact work. Therefore, they suggested to start internal, get buy-in, then launch external.

The definition of B2B brand activism extends to that of role model or guide in moral and ethical arenas. Thus, participants believed it should only be partaken in if social values are embedded within the organization. The need to first clarify a clear sense of brand purpose and values emerges for marketers discussing longer-term strategy around conscientious activism. Brands are authentic when they are true to their values:

"I think it's a reflection of the people that they employ here, and even the values of the company… like it's something that we've always kind of engaged in, and it's only really started to be highlighted now" (Chris).

Participants saw a great responsibility and a role for B2B brands to engage in socio-political issues and make a change. Participants universally questioned which commercial entity has the right to support social causes, and who has earned that right.

"[I]t's basically like we have the ability to change, right, the world because we do have quite the, I guess, the leverage. Yeah, politically and economically we can sit at the table with the government… we can sit at the table with tyrannies and, and make a difference" (Kelly).

In B2B brand activism as these marketers saw it, a firm's purpose and a social activist cause are jointly promoted as a way to strategically differentiate among suppliers, distributors and customers. Some participants also saw brand activism as part of positioning that can give a brand personality. It can also help a brand to achieve cut-through. In other words, being purpose driven was seen as a way to differentiate. The less difference there is between brands, the more aligning with a cause is a way to get noticed: is a brand "brave enough or in trouble enough?," Graham says he asks, to need to align with a cause and reposition itself. However, the need to be purpose driven and 'different' is clearly impacted by pressure from consumers, suppliers and competitors.

4.6. Decelerator: Justify spending

B2B brand activism includes a consideration of financial impacts as decisions are made about contracts to supply and distribute goods. There is also a clear tension between brand decision makers and their marketing managers around the activism messaging and practice people want, and that they can afford. Brands pay to get customers' attention. They must do it well, and spend smartly in the right channels, the right ways, at the right times. Brands with a bigger budget have more room to experiment, and large global brands also have more insulation from the risks and potential negative outcomes of exploring an activism strategy owing to their financial and reputational scale and strength.

"So for those corporates I see what they do and I understand it might not be possible for my team at this stage, yet we just need to be honest to ourselves. What we can do for the you know, the basic stuff that we can handle. We might not be able to do a whole big project" (Georgia).

This is because it can be polarizing and costly to adopt a stance on a social cause. Marketers within brands can also be held back from investing in marketing strategies with potential for wider social impact, such as B2B brand activism, by the need to justify spending and come up with measurable impact in direct units sold versus positive end-consumer sentiment. Financials drive decision making, but so does competitive positioning. Pushing back on investors as a reporting line for one marketing manager creates frustration that some don't see beyond their own lane. As Harry noted, "there are massive financial implications that make it, make it the right thing to do at a later time."

In order to combat push back, some participants suggested referring back to performance metrics such those linked to click-through views, clicks and shares on social media (i.e., brand pages, influencers), search engine optimization, the outcome of A/B testing and any changes to social sentiment analysis findings as well as having post-campaign analysis and reflection.

4.7. Decelerator: Question ability to enable long-term strategic changes

The process of enabling participants to even lead a response to social problems was clearly dependent on whether the organization allows for open and participatory cultures and co-creative approaches to managing the B2B brand. That is, those in larger, more hierarchical brands and the B2B services brands that supported them found their efforts to become more conscientious failing.

"…there's never anything such as free rein. And the bigger the international brand, then you, then you've got like two sometimes three different reporting lines… and so everything we did I had this triumvirate of sometimes completely opposite points of view that I had to get by." (Harry).

Kelly describes wading through bureaucracy and the experience of being restrained as ideas are stymied, while Harry discussed how adoption of social activism for the brand has to be a "personal mission."

Only in firms in which different stakeholders have more "free rein" to influence the definition of the brand's strategic actions, did marketing managers express autonomy and optimism towards their role and their ability to positively transform social issues and the competitive environment. Andrew shares his experiences of "turn[ing] around in our chairs" or "go[ing] down the road to have lunch" to get a social impact discussion rolling. Georgia describes a proactive marketing team that is likewise enabled by organization leaders to make quick calls. Whether, when and how to take steps in support of B2B brand activism mirrors that process in her firm.

"I could send [boss] an email right now and say 'I wanna do this.' And he'll be, 'OK. Well, let's yeah, yeah, look and see what happens.' We don't need to be jumping through hoops and all that kind of stuff, and … we can make those decisions really quickly" (Andrew).

"Really historically, each issue comes up for debate, it comes up, it's official, and then we look at how we feel about it, huh? What's the, you know, what's the right thing to do?" (Georgia).

Overall, a long-term vision and strategy for involvement in socio-political issues meant there was a desire for decision frameworks to be created to enable consistent responses to social causes as they arise. Longer term partnerships such as those with brands already known for cause activism, government or non-profits also were discussed as ways to help build a longer-term strategy for engagement.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical contribution

Drawing on empirical findings from our interviews with B2B marketers, we contribute to the literature in three key ways. The primary goal of this work is to build theory in B2B brand value and B2B brand legitimacy. First, we do so as we conceptualize and empirically examine the rise of B2B brand activism. Our work is the first to define and explain the conceptual framework for B2B brand activism as a way to build B2B brand value and legitimacy in a changing marketplace.

B2B brand activism provides value for B2B branding when instances of brand activism (a) reduces purchase risk and (b) builds customer relationships (Guenther & Guenther, 2019; Srninavasan, 2006). Successful branding can reduce the perceived risk of transactions. B2B transactions are known to create uncertainty, rely on customer input, and vary widely according to the multiplicity of actors on both buyer-side and provider-side (Srinistava et al., 1998). We add to the literature on B2B branding and intangible firm value by demonstrating a way B2B brand activism can enhance key brand value elements as a way to: (1) signal quality of the B2B offering, (2) build customer relationships, (3) encourage co-creation among buyers and providers, and (4) create a shared vision (Beverland et al., 2007; Guenther & Guenther, 2019; Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021; Srninavasan, 2006).

Among the marketing managers interviewed, those who were the most activist in the supply chain likened their role to that of educator and guide for all who touch their products. Thus, one goal of B2B brand activism identified in this study is to become a brand purpose champion, offering prototypes for social impact in sourcing and supply chain. This signals quality, a key claim to build B2B brand value (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Guenther & Guenther, 2019). But it also can build customer relationships, if executed properly. This is because a B2B brand activist may be considered to exert normative (i.e., moral compliance) pressures in their industry (Kolk & Perego, 2010). Kapitan et al. (2019) show that B2B firms seek to become sites of knowledge and information exchange as they pursue sustainably superior positioning, part of the cost-sharing and dispersion of risk in channel partners. Thus, B2B brand activism allows B2B brands that add value in the supply chain to become sites of exchange on best practice that encourage information sharing, values development, and innovation of skills. Here, B2B brand activism allows for the ultimate education, risk-sharing and learning among supply chain partners, which builds stronger customer relationships (Finch et al., 2015; Kapitan et al., 2019). While B2B brand activism practices may begin as normative, this quickly extends to exerting coercive (i.e., supply chain demands) and mimetic pressures on the industry.

B2B brand activism is also a tool for building legitimacy, contributing to existing frameworks centered on the creation of B2B brand legitimacy (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021; Mudambi et al., 1997). For instance, B2B brand activism offers a novel avenue of co-creation and

shared vision for stakeholders, both key claims to building B2B brand value (Beverland et al., 2007; Guenther & Guenther, 2019). B2B brand activism achieves this through the adoption of socially-oriented innovations, operations, and engagement, which communicate the brand's values and benefits and in turn achieve legitimacy for the B2B brand (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021). Importantly, pressure arises from all stakeholders to respond to social problems, and not only from customers of B2B offerings. Our analysis shows B2B marketers themselves drive conversations to create more social impact for their brands. The B2B brand legitimacy framework (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021) emphasizes how relationships with immediate clients and those in the broader industry are managed via digital platforms in a state of hyperconnectivity is a key to brand performance. To ignore or sidestep a social problem (Varadarajan & Kaul, 2018) risks relinquishing a B2B brand's control over the narrative. The slower pace of decision making in B2B contexts "means that the interacting parties have more time to make sense of the focal B2B brand actions, texts, and stories," (Gustfason & Pomirleanu, 2021, p. 24). This is compelling especially as platforms for the B2B market, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid development of B2B e-commerce for procurement (Boringer, Grehan, Kiewell, Lehmitz, & Moser, 2019), welcome a vast group of participants from manufacturers to software companies, app developers, buyers, customer firms and consumers. "All these entities interact and make sense of the focal brand actions according to their world view, and these platforms are an integral part of the ecosystem where the narratives and discourses about the B2B brand build" (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021, p 24). Thus, B2B activism efforts can stem from any stakeholder in a bid to remain legitimate. Our findings show that B2B brand activism is driven by those within a firm who make it their "personal mission" (Harry) to ensure their brand makes a social impact and stays relevant, and therefore legitimate to these stakeholders.

Our second contribution identifies the factors that accelerate and decelerate B2B brand activism. We advance an understanding of brand activism as an emergent marketing strategy. Empirical findings further show that, in order to build B2B brand purpose, activism efforts must demonstrate a B2B brand's legitimacy and conscientious, stakeholder-oriented approach, alongside being intrinsically true to the organization's values. As such, activism should start internally, getting buy-in to change practice and refine values in support of practice, and only then launch outward messaging. Thus, extending what is known about building B2B brand purpose and legitimacy, our findings suggest symbolic expressions of social intent, or 'brand texts', emerge as a corollary to organizational practice innovations. Texts generated from actions such as B2B brand activism signal to the brand's stakeholders that brand actions are legitimate (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021) and in turn influence behaviors within the industry. This builds on the scant research that explores how B2B and supply chain organizations should build a purpose and the benefits in doing so (Golob et al., 2020).

We also demonstrate that B2B brand activism may be more embedded across stakeholders than has been previously understood from research on authentic brand activism in consumer-facing contexts (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In this way, B2B brand activism appears to have greater emphasis on co-creation with and 'buy-in' from key business and supply chain partners, furthering B2B brand value. Our findings reveal that B2B brand activists tend to view social problem-solving actions and messaging as part of interdependent and shared actions, rather than taking an independent stand. In this way, B2B brand activism is shaped by and also shapes responses within a broader network. We add to an expanding set of literature which evolves B2B brand value beyond a more singular focus on dyadic buyer-seller exchange (Bonnin & Alfonso, 2019; Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021).
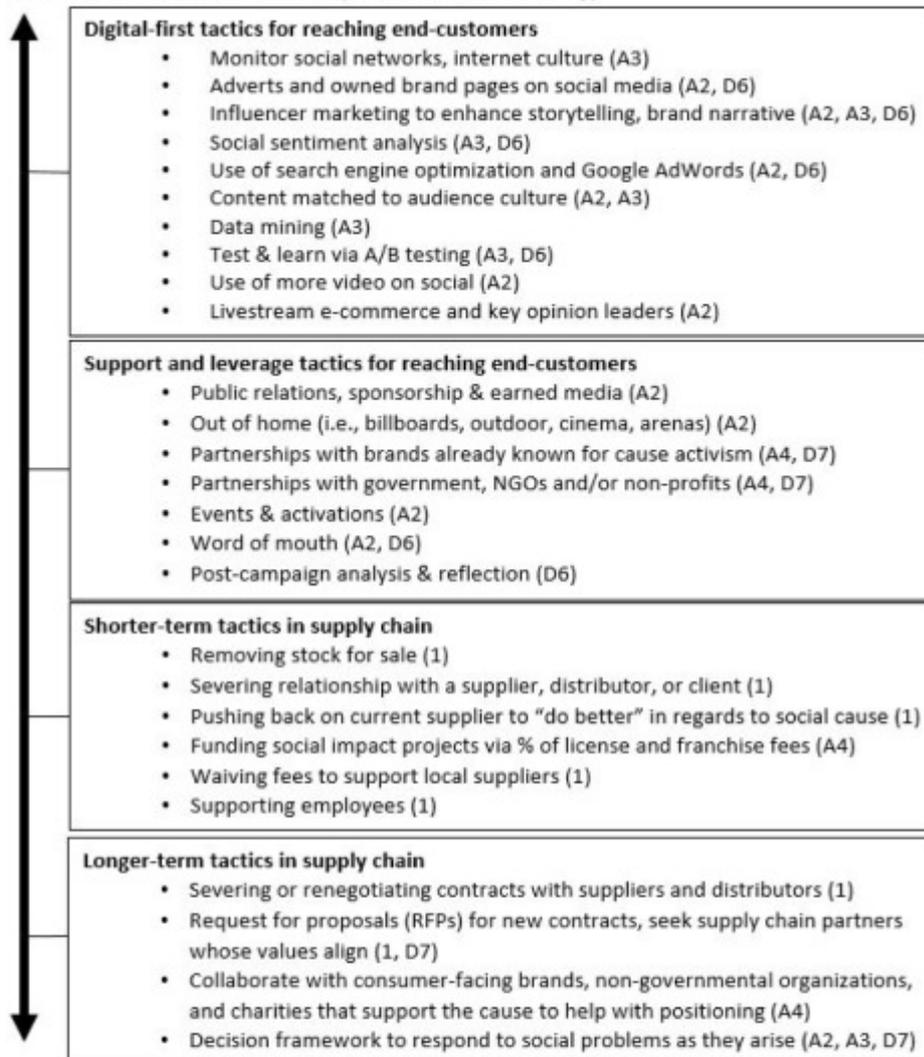
This disparity is likely because practices evolve alongside pressure to act in most market systems, and especially in systems characterized by shared information and pooled investment in resources and technology, such as the B2B context (Finch et al., 2015; Layton, 2015).

Our third contribution sets out a toolkit and guide for how B2B brand activism can function strategically to help curate B2B brand purpose. B2B brand purpose can create a clear signal to quality for a B2B brand, if short-term tactics comingle with long-term (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Guenther & Guenther, 2019). Our findings show that B2B brand activism implementation is facilitated by both short-term and long-term tactics identified by our participants. This demonstrates that B2B brand activism can be a strategic choice for organizations that wish to differentiate their B2B brand value. In this way, we theorize that B2B brand activism is strategic when action is taken to solve a social problem for stakeholders, when it is tied to a conscientious B2B brand purpose and values, and when it is part of a long-term B2B brand strategy (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). It is less strategic when actions and practice changes are not tied to purpose, values and long-term strategy. A tension between profits and social responsibility has long been part of the corporate social responsibility literature (Vaaland, Heide, & Grønhaug, 2008). Our findings both mirror and extend this view to a new theoretical framework, showing how marketing managers in this era of social innovation seek to build B2B brand purpose through a strategic consideration of short- and long-term goals for the firm. For instance, the competitive drive to maintain relevance is initially short-term and can be limiting for a B2B brand to build its ultimate purpose and brand equity (Iglesias et al., 2020), as shown in the balance of tactics and the inherent tensions between short and long-term tactics. We next discuss further the implications of this tension for the organization.

5.2. Practical implications

This research has clear implications for B2B brand managers seeking a roadmap to build brand purpose. The findings demonstrate that the adoption of B2B brand activism is about long-term conversation between brands and their business and supplier partners. Taken together, short-term tactics can yield longer-term strategies that form B2B brand purpose (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Many participants in our study reported short-term instances of activism, that were often divorced from or not fully integrated with the B2B brand's purpose. Ideally, strategic B2B brand activism moves beyond reactionary, short-term tactics to embrace networked prosocial innovations and operations that share risk and costs, yet are connected to a brand's purpose and engagement with society. As a result, B2B organizations can have positive impact beyond their own operations, achieving brand purpose. As an example from our empirical results, when one FMCG brand adopted recycled plastic molds, it both empowered local suppliers and outmaneuvered competitors who might face supply chain shortages or increased shipping costs for non-local production, creating clear competitive advantage via strategic B2B brand activism (cf. Finch et al., 2015; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). To help firms transition from the short-term, reactionary phase of B2B brand activism, we present Fig. 3 to show how the tools adopted by B2B brand activists might yield more short-term vs. long-term activist strategy.

Shorter-term tactics *(immediate, reactionary)*

Digital-first tactics for reaching end-customers
- Monitor social networks, internet culture (A3)
- Adverts and owned brand pages on social media (A2, D6)
- Influencer marketing to enhance storytelling, brand narrative (A2, A3, D6)
- Social sentiment analysis (A3, D6)
- Use of search engine optimization and Google AdWords (A2, D6)
- Content matched to audience culture (A2, A3)
- Data mining (A3)
- Test & learn via A/B testing (A3, D6)
- Use of more video on social (A2)
- Livestream e-commerce and key opinion leaders (A2)

Support and leverage tactics for reaching end-customers
- Public relations, sponsorship & earned media (A2)
- Out of home (i.e., billboards, outdoor, cinema, arenas) (A2)
- Partnerships with brands already known for cause activism (A4, D7)
- Partnerships with government, NGOs and/or non-profits (A4, D7)
- Events & activations (A2)
- Word of mouth (A2, D6)
- Post-campaign analysis & reflection (D6)

Shorter-term tactics in supply chain
- Removing stock for sale (1)
- Severing relationship with a supplier, distributor, or client (1)
- Pushing back on current supplier to "do better" in regards to social cause (1)
- Funding social impact projects via % of license and franchise fees (A4)
- Waiving fees to support local suppliers (1)
- Supporting employees (1)

Longer-term tactics in supply chain
- Severing or renegotiating contracts with suppliers and distributors (1)
- Request for proposals (RFPs) for new contracts, seek supply chain partners whose values align (1, D7)
- Collaborate with consumer-facing brands, non-governmental organizations, and charities that support the cause to help with positioning (A4)
- Decision framework to respond to social problems as they arise (A2, A3, D7)

Longer-term strategic initiatives *(planned, proactive)*

Note: Numbers in parentheses next to individual tactics correspond to the numbered accelerators and decelerators of B2B brand activism that emerged from the data. Where a tactic corresponds with an accelerator, it amplifies or reinforces its effect on B2B brand activism. Where a tactic corresponds with a decelerator, it attenuates or overcomes its effect on B2B brand activism.

Aggregate dimensions referenced in this figure:
1 = B2B brand activism: Marketers demand change along the supply chain
Accelerators:
A2 = Respond to the power of the end-consumer, regulators, and competitors
A3 = Track and use customer data
A4 = Maintain relevance for stakeholders

Decelerators:
D5 = Ensure activism aligns with B2B values and purpose
D6 = Justify spending
D7 = Question ability to enable long-term strategic changes

Fig. 3. Toolkit for strategic B2B brand activism.

This toolkit showcases how shorter-term tactics (aimed at gaining buy-in and cooperation from customers and partners in the supply chain) can be leveraged to build longer-term brand purpose. Many tactics are digital; digitalization is now fast becoming a critical part of B2B

networks (Gustafon & Pomirleanu, 2021). Indeed, we reinforce Gustafon and Pomirleanu's (2021) assertions that digital and social media technologies can be used to collect data relevant to brand legitimacy.

The tactics shown in Fig. 3 are formulated through the interview analysis. In Fig. 3, we have linked the tactics to their corresponding B2B activism accelerators and decelerators to map how certain tactics reinforce accelerators, while others overcome decelerators. For example, the digital-first tactic of A/B testing enables B2B marketers to test different versions of marketing elements (e.g., B2B brand activism vs. none; B2B brand activism campaign A vs. campaign B) with the relevant target audience and evaluate an outcome of strategic interest for each version (e.g., social media engagement via likes, comments, or shares). By enabling and learning from the collection of consumer data, A/B testing therefore reinforces tracking and using consumer data as an accelerator of B2B brand activism as well helping to overcome justification of spending as a decelerator. Shorter-term tactics aimed at customers can gain attention, yet fade in value when social impact is less relevant and does not accompany core values and purpose (ANA, 2020). The toolkit suggests short- and long-term tactics to build, affirm, and disseminate brand purpose and values in support of social activism. This enables activist brands to become paragons, role models and guides within their supply chain (i.e., conscientious B2B brand with purpose).

Fig. 3 shows how digital-first tactics tend to be immediate and reactionary. Our findings suggest that remaining in this top level of work for activism would help a B2B brand stay relevant and achieve cut-through, but would not necessarily lead to long-term brand positioning around social activism. This can be seen through longer term strategies relating more to the decelerators of B2B brand activism, pressures which require more time, effort and strategic thinking. The closer a brand's response is tied to operations, practice and innovation among business partners, the more likely these tactics lead to long-term strategic B2B brand activism. Here, activism moves from targeting end-consumers to embracing shorter-term tactics with suppliers (i.e., removing stock or ending relationships with suppliers whose values do not align) to adopting shared-risk and interdependence in the supply chain via longer-term tactics (i.e., collaborating with supply chain and sourcing supply chain partners whose values align).

5.3. Limitations and future research

Like with much research, this study has limitations, which provide avenues for future research. First, the chosen qualitative methodology is based on interpretation and studies a small sample, and thus, is not fully generalizable. Interviews were appropriate for this exploratory study as it is the first to address B2B brand activism. Future research could attempt to falsify and expand the findings through a descriptive design employing a large-scale survey of B2B marketing professionals. This would build on the current study by quantifying key variables and relationships identified (e.g., B2B brand activism, accelerators and decelerators, short-term and long-term tactics, outcomes of interest such as brand legitimacy and social impact) and produce generalizable results based on a representative sample.

Second, we conducted the study in New Zealand and thus, the findings may not be applicable to different competitive and regulatory environments. Although New Zealand shares many characteristics with developed, Western countries, replication of this study in countries with

differing macro environments represents a worthwhile avenue to reveal potential differences in B2B branding and B2B brand activism.

Third, we interviewed client-facing B2B services brands and B2B distributors and retailers (Coleman et al., 2011; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Data obtained from these participants may emphasize the communication and creative side of B2B marketing. Symbolic expressions via marketing elements have been a key focus in prior brand activism studies (Vredenburg et al., 2020); however, B2B organizations with a different functional role will be important for future study. For example, it would be interesting to explore manufacturers and industrial buying centres who may have different operations and innovations (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). This is because relationships among other sectors and the process of manufacturing from raw materials may result in an entirely different activism approach, drivers, and outcomes than articulated here. Similarly, future research should investigate the organizational structures which enable B2B brand activism. Our study found more reports of social problem solving efforts among marketers in B2B brands that were the most open and participatory, arguably the most conscientious (Iglesias et al., 2020; Iglesias & Ind, 2020). These participants reported being the most autonomous and empowered to embrace B2B brand activism that was more strategic in nature. Some who described such settings worked in smaller, more local firms. That means there is a lack of clarity around the factors that characterize B2B brands that are more (vs. less) ready to enact activism for social impact in the supply chain.

An interesting point of discussion for future scholars is how to balance the best interests of the customer and society with the well-being of the firm and its stakeholders, especially if there is misalignment between what stakeholders want and societal benefits (i.e., gun, alcohol, and tobacco sales). Utilitarianism holds that the most ethical choice will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Renouard, 2011). Here, we argue the reverse to how utilitarianism is often interpreted in business ethics (i.e., economic growth; Renouard, 2011) and would argue that this benefit is measured as social, not economic. Others have maintained that it is impossible to connect financial and social performance, adopting a normative approach (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). More recently, branding has been shown to facilitate positive market and societal system change while still pursuing profit (Spry, Figueiredo, Gurrieri, Kemper, & Vredenburg, 2021) and still having to make difficult choices when conflicting stakeholder demands arise (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Thus, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue these moral perspectives, strategic B2B brand activism suggests a shift in thinking towards a first and foremost benefit for society.

Finally, leveraging data mining and social media listening emerged among our participants as analytical procedures that drive decisions to engage in B2B brand activism. Because the current study was scoped to encompass the initial conceptualization of B2B brand activism as a growing marketing practice, privacy concerns relating to the use of aggregated customer data could not be extensively examined herein. Future research must prioritize a comprehensive and critical investigation into the tracking and monitoring of social values, and the use of social listening in B2B brand practice such that it both provides utility and operates within up-to-date and sufficiently rigorous ethical frameworks. Activism in the business markets, however, is a rapidly evolving arena. What are the ethical considerations and implications for tracking, monitoring of social values, and social listening in B2B brand practice?

Appendix 1

A.1. Interview guide for semi-structured interviews

Indicative questions:

1.

    What are your attitudes around organizations in general becoming involved with social or political causes as part of their marketing and advertising efforts?

    o

    Follow up: What are your attitudes towards YOUR ORGNIZATION'S BRAND becoming involved with political or social activism?

    o

    Follow up: Can you list any examples of social involvement for your organization or for a competitor?

2.

    Which brands should be engaging with social or political causes as part of their marketing efforts? Why?

    o

    Follow up: Which brands and organizations SHOULD NOT be engaging with social or political causes as part of their marketing and operations efforts? Why do you think that?

3.

    What % of your marketing budget would you say is devoted to brand activism and/or corporate social responsibility projects **today**?

    o

    Follow up: What % would you say might be devoted to these issues **in 5 years' time**? In 10 years' time?

4.

    What is the process of organizations getting involved with a social or political cause? How do you decide what social problems a brand should engage with?

5.

How are brands harnessing information technology/IT insights they have to select social problems to take action and market around (insights drawn from data, knowledge, understanding of their customers and non-customers)?

6.

How does social media and other channels determine the brand approach? How do competitor brands try to cut through the clutter and get attention and get noticed? How does your brand do so?

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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[1]

'Punchy' refers to having an immediate and vigorous impact

[2]

'Trend jacking' refers to brands and companies capitalizing on a current trend to strengthen their own profile in the marketplace. This could include, but is not limited to, an event, a hashtag, a movement, or a meme.