Journal of Marketing Management, 2014
Vol. 30, Nos. 3–4, 383–408, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2013.818574

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Web-based social movements contesting marketing strategy: The mobilisation of multiple actors and rhetorical strategies

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Abstract Previous studies suggest that marketing strategy is developed and used to mobilise and configure the actions of firm actors, creating a set of stabilising activities focused on the firm–customer dyad. Destabilising forces precipitated by the Internet and associated digital technologies involving contention and disruption by multiple actors are much less prevalent in the marketing literature. The central point we advance is that rather than marketing strategy being a controlled and stabilising force for firms in their relationships with customers, it can often lead to socially produced spaces where consumers and, importantly, other multiple actors form a social movement to actively attempt to destabilise it and contest its legitimacy. Using an innovative research approach, the findings of this study show how social movements proactively enrol and mobilise a wide range of relevant actors into a network of influence. Critical to this are rhetorical strategies, acting as important levers in attempts to destabilise and delegitimise a dominant firm's marketing strategy.

Keywords marketing strategy; social movements; marketing legitimacy; Internet marketing; rhetorical strategies

Introduction

Marketing strategy, as a key part of the marketing literature, faces considerable pressures from the rise of the Internet and associated technologies. Customers and other interested actors have become empowered in challenging firms and their marketing strategies, employing social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook for example. Marketing strategy has traditionally been defined as a stabilising force involving a firm's integrated pattern of decisions, which specify key choices concerning products, markets, marketing activities, and marketing resources (Varadarajan, 2010). Destabilising forces precipitated by digital technologies involving contention and disruption by multiple actors are much less prevalent in the marketing literature. Research has tended to focus on contestation within the firm–customer dyad, such as mobile phone advertising and consumers' perceptions

of privacy intrusion (Truong & Simmons, 2010). Although useful, this has come at the expense of a focus on multiple actors beyond the firm–customer dyad.

Kozinets and Handelman (2004) consider consumer movements as adversaries of consumption, theoretically framed by the ideology and culture of consumerism. While partially relevant to what this paper aims to achieve, our focus on marketing strategy takes a different position to their theoretical framing of a social movement in the ideology and culture of consumerism. The central point advanced is that rather than marketing strategy being a controlled and stabilising force for firms in their relationships with customers, it can often lead to socially produced spaces where consumers and, importantly, other multiple actors form a social movement to destabilise it and contest its market legitimacy. The role that is played by an array of actors forming a social movement presents an interesting, but overlooked, area that has particular relevance to understanding marketing strategy as an ongoing forming effort. Social movements have been defined as intentional collective efforts by an array of actors to transform the social order (Buechler, 2000). They can include government agencies, think tanks, sector associations, as well as consumers, utilising the Internet to mobilise. These actors are empowered, informed, confident, and willing and able to contest the legitimacy of marketing strategy, particularly when dominant firms are involved.

The aim of this study is to explore how web-based social movements attempt to influence the marketing strategy of a dominant firm, namely Tesco plc. The study objectives are twofold: first, to develop an understanding of how a web-based social movement mobilises around Tesco's marketing strategy; second, to show how a web-based social movement involving multiple actors attempts to destabilise and delegitimise the marketing strategy. An interesting aspect of the study is the two-stage approach adopted. In stage one, IssueCrawler was employed as a network-sampling tool to locate and map authoritative sites on the World Wide Web. IssueCrawler allowed us to track and explicate meaning pathways and network routes as social movement actors made web connections to mobilise around marketing strategy. In stage two, we gathered extensive background material on the social movement websites selected in the previous stage. This was supplemented by an extensive data set from semi-structured interviews with the associated social movement actors. The study contributes to the literature in several respects.

The marketing strategy of a dominant firm is shown to be of particular interest, and therefore can be significantly influenced by web-based social movements constituted by multiple actors. We theoretically connect marketing strategy to social movement theory in this respect. Sociological treatments are shown to have relevance for marketing strategy thinking beyond a set of firm-centric stabilising activities, typically oriented around resources, planning, and positioning. The rise of the Internet requires firms, and marketing managers in particular, to consider empowered multiple actors from various backgrounds forming into social movements to contest marketing strategy. More specifically, the findings show how social movements proactively enrol and mobilise a wide range of relevant actors into a network of influence. Critical to this are rhetorical strategies, which act as important levers in attempts to destabilise and delegitimise a dominant firm's marketing strategy.

The paper is organised in the following manner. First, we develop the literature review around social movements and marketing strategy before considering legitimacy and rhetoric. From this, we introduce the research approach to address the research aim and objectives before presenting study findings. Discussion of those

findings and implications is followed by conclusions along with future research directions.

Theoretical background

Social movements and marketing strategy

Marketing strategy is developed and used to mobilise and configure the actions of firm actors, creating a set of stabilising activities typically oriented around resources, planning, and the positioning of products and services to customers (Hooley, Broderick, & Moller, 1998; Hooley, Lynch, Brooksbank, & Shepherd, 1988). Some sort of collective, firm-centric practice is needed, typically involving choices and action around formulation-implementation-control. This practice creates, communicates, and delivers product offerings and value in customer exchanges, enabling organisational goals to be attained through achieving sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace (Varadarajan, 2010). The modern logic of marketing strategy, drawing from economics, views the firm and the customer as separate and discrete, with the customer exogenous to the firm and a passive recipient of the firm's value creation efforts (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009).

Such an understanding is narrowly defined, however, lagging behind the practice of market strategising and the development of technologies such as the Internet and mobile platforms with their potential to act as a (de-)stabilising force. They open up new opportunities for multiple actors to engage with and mobilise around marketing strategy. The development of social media and user-generated content online can benefit firms, with Cova and Pace (2006) finding brand community benefits extending to a low value convenience food product such as Nutella. Higher value products such as Ducati also reveal positive brand associations with social media online (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). Firms and their brands can benefit from new forms of customer empowerment and the opportunities presented through collaboration online (Simmons, 2008; Simmons, Thomas, & Truong, 2010).

Negatively, brand communities can also seek major changes in the social order or the righting of perceived wrongs, challenging an established brand (Cova & White, 2010). Online consumers are viewed as more active, social, participative, and more resistant and militant than ever before (Kucuk, 2008). In situations of brand hegemony where dominant firms such as Microsoft or Google hold sway over consumers and others, online communities are able contest the moral legitimacy of such firms. But as Kozinets and Handelman (2004) and others point out, we know very little about the underpinnings of such contestations, consumer protests, and boycott. Their focus on consumer movements and activism advances our understanding in this respect, although it is theoretically framed by the ideology and culture of consumerism.

In this paper, we focus on how social movements, constituted by multiple actors from various and disparate backgrounds and interests, attempt to contest the legitimacy of a dominant firm's marketing strategy. For example, the anti-consumerist Adbusters and like-minded actors have attempted to leverage the Internet using guerrilla tactics to destabilise and delegitimise the iconic brand Starbucks (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). In Thompson et al.'s (2006) study, widespread critiques by mass media and anti-brand activists leveraging the Internet, while not specifically

defined or considered in their paper as a social movement, challenged Starbucks as a corporate titan antithetical to its emotional branding strategy and focus on aggressive market growth at the expense of local economies and cultures.

Social movements consist of organised, episodic, manifestly political, public interactions between makers of claims and their targets, typically the state or its representatives (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). This definition has been criticised for being too narrow in not, for example, adequately explaining lifestyle-centred or identity-based movements that combine personal and social transformation (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012). Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) offer a broader conception, attempting to explain social movements as challengers of multiple sources of power (rather than only the state) in the pursuit of material and symbolic change, and involving challengers both within and outside of targeted institutions. This new social movement (NSM) research stream has focused on the role of culture and identity in social movements, and how movements can construct grievances as well as create and maintain collective identities (Haenfler et al., 2012).

Drawing on Touraine (1981) as a central theorist within NSM theorising, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) note the interdependence of three elements in a social movement's ideology: (1) identity, representative of the self-definition and collective identify of social movement actors or members; (2) opposition, representative of social movement members' identification and definition of their opponent; and (3) totality, representative of objectives that are to be attained through the struggle inherent in the social movement. Accordingly, a social movement's ideology stabilises relationships between actor, opponent, and objectives to legitimise the actor and negate any traces of positive social identity of the opponent. They go on to state:

> The members of a movement identify themselves in a mobilising fashion, as affirming a beneficial social goal that transcends their immediate interests. Correspondingly, their opponent is ideologically linked to illegitimate amoral or immoral pursuits and usually identified in antisocial terms. The adversary is also represented as an obstacle to the general good, preventing the moral goals for which the activist strives. (p. 693)

Corporate elites, and their carefully developed and stabilising marketing strategies in particular (see Thompson et al., 2006, for the excellent Starbucks example), are viewed as particularly unsavoury opponents. Dominant opponents such as Starbucks are essential for a social movement if it is to be effective in unifying and motivating multiple actors to destabilise and delegitimise their marketing strategies. Social movements are change-orientated struggles by such individuals or groups, who have unequal access to the power of dominant firms such as Starbucks and who oppose what they perceive as, for example, their destructive and rapacious marketing strategies that put smaller independent coffee shops out of business.

NSM theory generates interesting insights into how such a social movement, constituted by collective action involving multiple actors, may mobilise and contest the marketing strategy of a dominant firm. For example, actors need to frame what specific aspects of marketing strategy they are opposed to, as part of knowing what they stand for and what they want to achieve. Only when they do this can they create enough consensuses to mobilise collective action. Further, NSM theory suggests that marketing strategy is unlikely to be limited to planned and controlled firm–customer interactions. Given the pervasive and persuasive reach and power of marketing strategies associated with dominant firms, it has been well reported that a wider

range of Internet-based actors present a significant challenge to marketing strategies and their legitimacy. In this context, rhetorical strategies represent an important social skill used by actors in the construction and competition of institutional logics (Sillince, 1999; Sillince & Brown, 2009; Sillince, Harindranath, & Harvey, 2001). We argue that rhetorical strategies, while of use to the dominant firms, can be of particular use to social movements in contesting the legitimacy of a firm's marketing strategies. This is developed further in the next section around the notion of legitimacy.

Legitimacy and rhetoric

Management theorists have traditionally viewed organisations as rational systems – social machines designed for the efficient transformation of material inputs into outputs (Scott, 1987). Institutional theorists emphasise that organisational dynamics are derived from elements beyond technological and material aspects, to incorporate cultural norms, symbols, beliefs, and rituals (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Beckert (1999) notes that under the institutional account, actors are embedded in taken-for-granted rules that form the notion of rationality for them. The concept of legitimacy is integral to institutions and its associated practices, processes, and structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Indeed, struggles for legitimacy are at the heart of institutional processes. Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (p. 574). It represents 'an anchor-point of a vastly expanded theoretical apparatus addressing the normative and cognitive forces that constrain, construct, and empower organizational actors' (p. 571).

Essentially, then, legitimacy is socially constructed in reflecting congruence between the behaviours of the legitimated entity and the shared, or assumed to be shared, beliefs of relevant social groups. The legitimacy of marketing strategy can been defined as the stabilising forces associated with well-planned and executed strategies of relevance to specific others, leading to interested actors such as customers and suppliers being more likely to provide support to actors that appear desirable, proper, or appropriate. One way that dominant firms have to promote the legitimacy of their marketing strategy to exogenous actors is through explaining how and why it connects with existing social and cultural norms. This activity has been referred to as legitimising rhetoric (Blume, 1997) linked with attempts to fit a prevailing logic. Logics, which can be multiple (Hoffman, 1999), are defined as 'the underlying assumptions, deeply held, often unexamined, which form a framework within which reasoning takes place' (Horn, 1983, p. 1).

It therefore follows that if a dominant firm's legitimising rhetoric fails to fit with the underlying assumptions and shared beliefs of exogenous actors, the legitimacy of the marketing strategy may be contested by a social movement. According to Suddaby and Greenwood (2005), such contestations will rely on rhetoric in which the legitimacy of competing logics is openly debated, shaping and disciplining firms' and individual managers' activities. Perceived negligence or destructive outcomes to the environment or local economy, for example, could result in mobilising critique and thus influence within the institutional mechanisms that regulate the behaviours around a firm's marketing strategy. In these debates, social movement actors will

employ rhetorical devices to connect elements of the existing or proposed form to broader cultural understandings.

Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) identified two elements of rhetoric in contests over legitimacy. In the first element, social movement actors employ recurring rhetorical strategies designed to connect a dominant firm's marketing strategy with templates or scenarios of change. Persuasive language, or rhetorical strategy, is viewed as a significant practice in this respect. Rhetorical strategies represent the deliberate use of persuasive language to legitimate or resist a dominant firm's marketing strategy by constructing fit or non-fit among attributes of the strategy. The second element comprises institutional vocabularies or clusters of identifying words used by the social movement to magnify the contradictions in a dominant firm's marketing strategy.

Therefore, rhetorical strategies may be used by a social movement to confer ideas, aims, interests, claims, discipline, arrangements, and alternatives as more efficient, less dominant, less dysfunctional, or less disruptive to the marketing strategies pursued by dominant firms. Thus, social movements may take on an element of transdiscursivity in contesting marketing strategy. Transdiscursivity is the interlinking and social movement network formation through hyperlinks with loosely mapped forms, laissez faire, or expert decision making (Rogers & Zelman, 2002). Jenkins (1983) describes this as 'the process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for collective action' (p. 532). For example, a social movement may use hypertext links on individual actor websites to connect multiple discourses with powerful external agencies, potentially creating a new persuasive argument for an alternative to the dominant firm and its marketing strategy. Rhetoric is then be pursued by the social movement in contestation through 'the persuasive discourse used by members in their interactions with each other and outsiders' (Golant & Sillince, 2007, p. 1150). Previous research has shown that firms display their inter-organisational affinities, or make known their strategic affiliations, through such hyperlinks (Rogers & Zelman, 2002). The question of whom to link to is therefore likely to be a serious matter for actors in a social movement (e.g. Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2011).

To sum up, the literature discussion shows how marketing strategy is increasingly being influenced by a dynamic, interactive, and often socially contested virtual space involving interested actors well beyond the traditionally defined firm–customer dyad. Given the reach and power of marketing strategies associated with dominant firms, it has been reported, largely in the popular press, that a range of actors form social movements in an attempt to contest their legitimacy. It is therefore timely to conduct an academic study of the role played by such social movements in this context. The next section presents the research approach developed to conduct such a study.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore how web-based social movements attempt to influence the marketing strategy of a dominant firm, namely Tesco plc. The objectives of the study are twofold: first, to develop an understanding of how a web-based social movement mobilises around Tesco's marketing strategy; second, to show how a web-based social movement involving multiple actors attempts to destabilise and delegitimise the marketing strategy. In the following sections, we first describe why

retailing, and Tesco in particular, was selected as an appropriate setting for this study. Subsequently, we describe the two-stage research design adopted.

Study setting: Retailing and Tesco plc

To explore how web-based social movements attempt to influence the marketing strategy of a dominant firm, we needed to identify a firm and associated marketing strategy that was known to be controversial. The UK grocery retailing market was known to have a high visibility in the media, with a wide range of actors across the value chain and territorial claims in the retail sector (i.e. it matters where your store is located). Three indicators of the contested nature of grocery retailing are: the UK grocery market being the subject of two major enquiries in recent years (CompetitionCommission, 2000, 2008); the amount of press coverage in relation to decline of the High Street (Portas, 2011); and the degree of regulatory scrutiny (Clarke et al., 2004; Wrigley, Branson, Murdock, & Clarke, 2009). Nowhere has this regulatory scrutiny been more intense than that of Tesco plc. For example, the 2011 opening of a Tesco Express in Stokes Croft, Bristol, witnessed a virtual campaign and various street protests, with Tesco's store being vandalised and shut down – blogs appeared such as 'No Tesco in Stokes Croft' (http://notesco.wordpress.com/) and 'Boycott Tesco' (http://boycotttesco.wordpress.com/) to contest and campaign against Tesco and the store. The case prompted Bristol City Council to write to the Department for Communities and Local Government to address the tensions arising (BBC News, 2011). The rapid growth of retail firms in general and Tesco's territorial expansion in particular has significantly affected areas of everyday life across the UK. This has led some media commentators to promote the positives (Telegraph, 2011) and others to highlight the negatives of Tesco's expansion and, by inference, their marketing strategy (Guardian, 2011).

Stage one: Identifying social movement actors and issues

Although media commentators such as the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian* have taken positive and negative views of large corporations such as Tesco, we did not want to focus exclusively on the tensions highlighted by press sources. Newspaper reporting brings a selection bias, as not all actors will be covered in a given newspaper, and what is covered is not a random sample of all events that took place (Mueller, 1997). Rather, we were interested in the ongoing activity of digitally enabled social movement actors who have a sustained interest in, particularly, Tesco's marketing strategy and who leverage resources to contest it. Consequently, we used IssueCrawler (http://issuecrawler.net), a network sampling tool, to locate and map authoritative sites on the World Wide Web that were involved in an ongoing basis in issue debates concerning Tesco.

IssueCrawler allowed us to identify a network of authoritative actors contesting Tesco's marketing strategy on the Web. (This methodology has been used in political science projects; see, e.g. http://www.govcom.org.) These websites are important because they seek legitimacy through their framing of the 'issues' on the basis of network representation (Marres & Rogers, 2008; Rogers & Ben-David, 2008). Accordingly, the Tesco debate was accessed via URLs, identified in discussions with leading retail marketing experts. The Tescopoly.org website was used as an initial entry point. It was judged reasonable to assume that .orgs were more likely to result in

the researcher locating an actor network comprising the core of the social movement (Rogers & Marres, 2000).

Next, the web or networks of interlinking sites where mapped based on their relevance. We compared the results from IssueCrawler with those of two further engines: Metacrawler.com and a co-link research machine at http://www.issueatlas.net. In the initial sweep, we identified think tanks (e.g. New Economics Foundation, ResPublica), as well as noteworthy media outlets ranging from national to local newspapers (*Guardian*, eveningnews24.co.uk). We also identified a range of globally orientated, yet independent and autonomous, actors (e.g. Friends of the Earth, Action Aid, Ecologist, etc.). The main actors in this social movement were nationally orientated, notably the Tescopoly.org action group. Most were not-for-profit and cooperative in nature. Value-chain actors were also identified, for example Banana Link. Social movement actors such as Every Little Hurts and Belper Against Tesco (BAT) were formed by community residents opposed to Tesco's marketing strategy.

IssueCrawler ran for a week during November 2009 and identified 51 websites, comprising different types of social interaction and decision making from a range of knowledgeable participants. The extent to which the network constitutes a debate is evident in the cross-domain participation (transdiscursivity), common routing directions (shared linked recipients), and common recognitions of positions (warrants). To map Tesco's issue network, debates, hot routes, and storylines needed to be selected. In line with the approaches outlined by Rogers and Zelman (2002) to pinpoint pertinent issues, we used the 'surfer tracing' technique (also known as collaborative filtering) to find relevant material.[1] Thus, IssueCrawler allowed us to identify the linkages and go beyond a random identification of websites (Rogers, 2002; Rogers & Ben-David, 2008; Rogers & Marres, 2000).

Using identified website material, we first began to develop a structure for each website. A preliminary assessment suggested that the Tesco debate was emerging, increasingly articulated, institutionalised, and interconnected in an ongoing issue debate. Second, we evaluated the content and validity of the websites that matched the warrants as focal constructs of human tension, disruptive rhetoric, and venting by subjecting them to scrutiny and inter-code reliability from the three researchers. We organised the websites by case, detailing the relevant background characteristics and the characteristics of composite websites. Some of the websites selected did not have an anti-Tesco objective as their priority objective. However, they showed explicit support for actors contesting by endorsing such information on their pages. Fourteen websites were selected for further analysis. This heterogeneous group of actors is considered as a single grouping in the study because of the sustained levels of contestation around the aspects of Tesco's marketing strategy. Table 1 provides an outline and summary of the diverse characteristics represented in the sampled websites. Studying such a diverse set of websites and associated actors offered a firmer empirical grounding than studying a homogeneous one.

[1]Issue debates are established when individuals enter a site and position views vis-à-vis others in the issue network. In doing so, they become hot routes through which the debate emerges. Therefore, rather than randomly selecting a number of websites with a series of hunches, we sought to identify and map out an issue network – that is, major and minor organisations (and the deeper pages on their sites dealing with specific issues) which publicly positioned themselves vis-à-vis other constituencies with vested interests debating particular issues.

Table 1 Social movement actors and observations.

Activists (1 & 2)	Entity type	Founder	URL(s)	Launch date	Funding
Tescopoly	Campaign activists alliance	Group of organisations, NGOs, unions, and pressure groups	Tescopoly.org	2005	Members and Independent Charitable Trusts
Friends of the Earth	International network of organisations	Single individual	Foe.co.uk	1971	Individuals, events, grants, and trading
Very Little Helps	Online activist forum	Single individual	Verylittlehelps.com	2002	Self-financed with the occasional help of members
Banana Link	Non-profit cooperative	Single individual	Bananalink.org.uk	1966	Grants, donations from British trade unions
Action Aid	Charity	Single individual	Actionaid.org.uk	1972	Donations
Every Little Hurts	Campaign Activist Group	Group of Tolworth residents	Everylittlehurts.org.uk	2006	Member of Parliament
CASPIAN (Consumers Against Supermarket Privacy Invasion and Numbering)	National grassroots consumer group	Single individual	Nocards.org; Spychips.com; BoycottTesco.com	1999	Not disclosed

(*Continued*)

Table 1 (Continued).

Activists (1 & 2)	Entity type	Founder	URL(s)	Launch date	Funding
The Ecologist	International group	Group	Theecologist.org	1970	Members and independent charitable trusts
BATS (Belper Against Tesco)	Campaign activist group	Group of Belper residents	Belperagainsttesco.com	2008	Unknown
Association of Convenience Stores	Association	Group	Acs.org.uk	Unknown	Membership
Bishopton Against a Glut of Supermarkets	Campaign activist group	Residents	Bogofs.org	Unknown	Unknown
Fresh and Easy Buzz	Blog	Individual	Freshneasybuzz.blogspot.com	2007	Unknown
Corporate Watch	International organisation	Group	Corporatewatch.org.uk	1996	Donations, trading of research reports
Attac International	International organisation	Group	Attac.org	1998	Donations

Note. A hyperlink mother map of the actors in the Tesco debate on the web was produced online via IssueCrawler on the 24 November 2009 (GMT 17:41), with and without direction of hyperlinking. A request for the schematic representation output file was requested from the Web Master at info@govcom.org. However, this was not made available in response to the request. The authors therefore used the raw data from the IssueCrawler website. If further details are required, this may be requested from the Web Master.

To see an illustration of the nature of these maps, see Rogers and Marres' (2000) paper on Shell and climate change. This work presents a range of directional maps as well as a discursive map and how actors debate on the web, positioning themselves around the regulatory statements.

Stage two: Understanding social movement actors and their actions

In this stage, we relied on two primary data sources: website archives and in-depth interviews. First, we began data collection by gathering extensive background material on the social movement websites selected in the previous stage (120 hours in total). Second, we supplemented this extensive data set with semi-structured interviews with the associated social movement actors. An average of two interviews was conducted per actor website, accumulating 28 face-to-face in-depth interviews, mainly conducted in London. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length, and were recorded and transcribed to generate some 600 pages of transcript. After introducing the nature and purpose of the study, the interview began by asking participants to describe Tesco, their relationship with the firm, and finally the tensions that stood out to them in relation to their marketing in particular. We then compared this with the website observation data gathered.

The two research stages were administered consecutively. The triangulation of data was based upon achieving an understanding of the paths of meaning and a development of a range of categorisations around the rhetorical strategies from both the social movement actors' interviews and associate technology artefacts (i.e. websites). This was undertaken in three ways. First, in stage one, we triangulated the results of IssueCrawler with the results of two further search engines – Metacrawler.com as well as a co-link research machine at http://www.issueatlas.net. Second, triangulation was achieved in the semblance of an actor (stage one) and the rhetoric (stage two) through the way that actors linked terms of reference and referred implicitly or explicitly to other activists' positions. We delineated between the web analysis and the cross-sectional thematic analysis corpus data material, arguing that conflating the two might be conceptually problematic and analytically unhelpful. Finally, triangulation was achieved in the second stage through ongoing discussion and debate between the three researchers at the axial coding stage. As outlined by Weber (2005, p. 232), in stage two, we followed a commutation test, analysing whether one expression of idea can be replaced with another without fundamentally changing the sense of the original phrase or quotation.

A grounded-theory, content analysis of the social movement actors' websites provided insights that helped us break out of the existing marketing strategy paradigm (c.f. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Qualitative content analysis is well established in the marketing literature (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991), and helped us to uncover the cognitive processes of social movement actors as they unfolded on their websites and free of retrospective reconstruction. NVivo was not used; rather, we followed the constant comparative method advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). To understand the rhetorical strategies from the corpus of data (i.e. both websites and the interview transcripts), we used Gibbs' (2002) framework: opening coding to identify first-order codes (e.g. the actors' tactics); axial coding to refine the categories into second-order analytical themes (e.g. institutional vocabularies); and selective coding in the form of meta-theoretical themes (e.g. appropriation, association, and importation) which links the categories together and enables stories to be told. The emergent stories created frames that contextualised the actors' issues and contestation of Tesco's marketing strategy. Thus, several frames were built to describe the 'principles of organization' that govern 'social events and our subjective involvement in them' (Goffman, 1974, p. 10). Our approach therefore follows the reflexive tradition insofar as we are aware of our own role in the process of analysis (Alvesson &

Sköldberg, 2000). The next section presents the findings derived from the research approach.

Research findings

This section outlines rhetorical strategies deployed by the social movement actors and their networks of influence identified by IssueCrawler and the in-depth interviews. From analysis of the in-depth interviews and website archives, we identified three broad rhetorical strategies: (1) appropriation of corporate marketing speak; (2) association between local and non-local as well as economic and social agendas; and (3) importation of what we term multiple 'outsider' vocabularies. These rhetorical strategies are summarised in Table 2.

Appropriation of corporate marketing speak

The first rhetorical strategy revealed from the findings is termed 'appropriation'. In order to attempt to destabilise and delegitimise Tesco's marketing strategy, social movement actors' embraced rhetoric that could be considered as antithetical corporate marketing jargon. It was evident from the interview respondents that they presented a critique of the (in)human qualities pertaining to Tesco's marketing strategy. Actors constructed various oppositional human forms and events associated with Tesco's marketing strategy. Respondents referred to Tesco in various ways in this respect, such as 'a machine', 'an uncaring bully', 'an alarming force', 'destructive in an aggressive pursuit', 'obliterating many', and 'a bad neighbour'. Here, rhetoric relied on an emphasis of values in which the approach often involved ethical evaluations of the relative 'goodness' or 'evil' of Tesco's marketing strategy. This rhetoric was used to demonise the increasingly omnipresent nature of the Tesco brand – what one respondent referred to as 'Tesco town culture that has come to pervade discussion within the media' (A4). Another respondent explained:

> Tesco, like other similar firms, develops a cute persona, but lurking behind that big friendly mask is the 'killer whale' machine of capitalism. The same machine seeks to undermine us as the anti-business or socialist to undermine our agenda. We are not that. They think in polar opposites, so we mirror that. (A9)

As well as drawing on dehumanising vocabularies, actors employed pastiche to contest Tesco's marketing strategy. Respondents' statements were often playful, tongue in cheek, and used in a self-referential – often ironic – fashion. They appropriated discourses that had appeared within the dominant discourse of Tesco's marketing strategy, typically associated with their sales promotions and customer care (e.g. verylittlehelps, everylittlehurts, bogoffs). These adapted motifs were at odds with Tesco's intended performance outcomes from their marketing strategy:

> We take fundamental marketing 'givens' and cut them down to size. The bigger the marketing brand or claim, the harder it will fall. For us, this is important, as it opens up awkward question marks around market norms and who knows how that might end up. We actively seek out the big brands to do this to – to keep them 'in check'. (A15)

Table 2 Rhetorical strategies, institutional tensions, and legitimacy.

Meta-theoretical themes: Rhetorical strategies	**Second-order analytical themes: Institutional vocabularies**	**First-order codes: Tactics**	**Illustrative**	**Tension created**
Appropriation of corporate marketing managerial speak	De-anthropomorphizing Pastiche Magnification	Dehumanise Demonise Effacing	Verylittlehelps Everylittlehurts Bogofs	Choice Survival Destruction Decline
Association between local and non-local and social and economic agendas	Local alignment Non-local contagion Re-embedding social	Localism Mainstreaming Social well-being Sustainability	Action Aid Corporate Watch Banana Link	Alienation Power Historical erosion and decline Exploitation
Importation of Multiple 'outside' vocabularies	Scientific facticity Media soundbiteism Neo-Liberalism	Statistical citation Academic research Freedom Humour	Urban and Environmental Policy Institute New Economics Foundation ResPublica	Predictability and inevitability Vulnerability

The last point reveals the tensions around disciplining the dominant firm and their marketing strategy – the unintended consequences of 'robust' market positions, 'strong' economic market share performances, and 'given' marketing communication messages is tenuous for these social groups. Marketing strategy is dependent on repeated performances and renewal in each successive performance. Taken-for-granted social norms contain the potential for alteration and, ultimately, open up tension and contestation. For the actors, this manifests itself in the continuous, conspicuous, and sometimes ridiculous inversion of social norms explicitly equated with Tesco's marketing strategy. For example, actors deliberately constructed websites to be 'awash' (A20) with signifying artefacts, mirroring Tesco's corporate colours and aesthetic. The actors' (marketing) artefacts sought to generate a negative impression of Tesco that directed website visitors to read more about perceived tensions and destructive activities. Respondents pointed to opportunities to name and shame: YouTube clips, posters, and campaigns to tarnish the image as well as reputation of Tesco. Tescopoly.org, for instance, listed Local Campaigns on their website – for example, the 'view campaigns in your region' hyperlink, as this actor explained:

> The presence and influence of this firm is immense from products, services, real estate, logistics finance, garden centres, and the list goes on. They colonise with their marketing activity, and so we have sought to mimic it. (A27)

This appropriation rhetorical strategy therefore attempted to reinterpret Tesco's marketing strategy as wilfully destructive, unremitting, and untuned to the subtleties of local markets. This was based on the perceived threat of Tesco's growth rate and increasing dominance of the UK grocery retail market, with respondents pointing to a reduced variety of retailers for consumers to choose from.

Association between local and non-local as well as economic and social agendas

The second rhetorical strategy is termed 'association'. The search by IssueCrawler exhibited transdiscursivity in this respect – that is, cross-domain association between .orgs ($n = 13$), .co.uks ($n = 21$), .govs ($n = 4$), .infos ($n = 1$), .nets ($n = 2$), and .coms ($n = 10$). Studies have shown that the 'issue' may differ substantially depending on the user's preferred entry points to the Web (Rogers & Zelman, 2002). The social movement's network of influence appeared to be associated typically with .org-centric and .co.uk-centric issue networks. Rogers and Zelman (2002) suggest that there are distinctive hyperlink styles with .orgs being highly networked and .coms being less networked, and this was confirmed in our search results.

Interview respondents revealed an attempt to connect to other relevant constituencies with vested interests, creating affiliations that together challenged Tesco's marketing strategy in other institutional settings. The findings revealed that social movement actors would shift between institutional settings to escalate their local agenda, switching back and forth between the non-local and the local, the social and the economic, emphasising sometimes the past and sometimes the present. For example, respondents discussed historical appeals associated with not abandoning the traditions of yesteryear foregrounding the contemporary importance of local retailers. There were attempts to look into the future with respondents often highlighting potential dangers as a result of negative changes to local communities as a result of Tesco's marketing strategy. Many of the respondents stated that what happened at Stokes Croft in Bristol was an indication of future contestation.

An important dimension of this associative rhetorical strategy was the initial reframing of the institutional vocabulary in local terms. This helped to align their causes with local vested interests (e.g. The Small and Family Farms Alliance, Food Access Network UK). The discourse of localism provided a potent resource that the actors drew on to challenge the dominance of Tesco's marketing strategy and its role in the decline of local retail boutiques, high streets, and suppliers in the community. In order to undermine Tesco's marketing strategy, respondents contrasted Tesco's rhetoric of localism in their marketing communications with a national discourse:

> When we challenge Tesco, they sometimes takes notice and in their way, their terms, their approach. Interestingly, their strategy 'steering wheel' now includes 'our community', suggesting that they're at least acknowledging us. (A2)

The actors put an overwhelming emphasis on Tesco's perceived goal to capture the national and more general international market. Tesco's marketing strategy was therefore represented as antithetical to the commitments to localism. Mobilising social movement actors required the creation of new broader agendas and connections to other relevant constituencies with vested interests. IssueCrawler supported by respondent comments indicated international linkages (e.g. War on Want), linkages to supply-chain exploitation groups (e.g. Labour behind the Label), and employment relations (e.g. GMB Union). Using the rhetorical strategy of association, respondents commented on how the local could be embedded in the non-local, specifically in the case of global networks and the global agendas:

> We are not alone. It has to be a collective pursuit this agenda. Therefore, we seek to find resonance not only among ourselves but to other like-minded collective groupings, link with them on the Net, and develop a collective awareness. I think they call it hyperlink diplomacy! (A25)

Social movement actors built collective affiliations in ways that supported their reframing of Tesco's marketing strategy. Actors' reframing appeared to be based on an a priori premise such as 'aggressive market growth', 'negative impact on the environment', and in this claim by respondents from EveryLittleHurts.org:

> Tesco's own figures show an additional 5000 vehicles a day would use the Tolworth roundabout causing extra congestion in an already severely congested area.

Such associative rhetoric provided a sense of community. An evident aim was to establish a sense of togetherness around certain values and identification that overcame actors' feelings of separateness and seclusion from one another. The Banana Link website respondents highlighted the wider lack of community in local areas as a result of Tesco's procurement practices. This rhetoric urged Tesco to take responsibility for destroying the sense of community that once existed in local communities.

There was also an expectation for Tesco to stay within a certain marketing strategy remit in terms of their customer relationship management practices. This could be seen in the Boycott Tesco campaign by the CASPIAN group. Respondents were positive about the campaign focus on a potential breach of privacy by Tesco through the use of RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) 'spy chips'. The rhetoric revealed a certain appeal to people's emotions, as they were aware that it was 'normal' to avoid manipulative practices. Moreover, the rhetoric also suggested that

the social movement was pushing to force, or discipline, Tesco to operate within defined boundaries in its marketing strategy, with respondents implying an underlying need for greater control from regulatory bodies. From this perspective, IssueCrawler revealed that the social movement network of linkages provided a diverse assemblage of sites that at first sight appeared unrelated to the retail domain of Tesco (i.e. attac.org, actionaid.org.uk). Interestingly, we noted that these sites were also linked to the Competition Commission (competition-commission.org.uk) and the Advertising Standards Authority (asa.org.uk), suggesting attempts to leverage these powerful institutions in contesting Tesco's marketing strategy. Linkages were also detected with the UK House of Commons All-Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group, as well as the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). There were also clear attempts to link to and mobilise Friends of the Earth.

These powerful associations appeared to be viewed by actors as a way to signal to Tesco a looming threat of public regulation if their claims were unmet. For example, reference was made to the Office of Fair Trading inquiry in 2008 and the establishment of an ombudsman to oversee the relationship between supermarket chains and their suppliers and the impact on local communities. The association-oriented rhetorical strategies therefore comprised a form of escalating resistance as the social movement actors pitched Tesco against local interests, while simultaneously drawing upon wider non-local issues with similar values to those held by the social movement. Using both local and non-local discourse from a wider range of networked actors, the social movement framed issues such as domestic market sourcing with the plight of those in emerging markets (pertaining to international sourcing).

Here, the rhetorical strategy pointed to the perception of two entities: one more immediate (local), the other latent (non-local); one deep (historical, social), the other on the surface (the present, the economic). Respondents emphasised the importance of linking to large-scale actors such as Friends of the Earth in order to expose issues and concerns about the ethics, or lack thereof, perceived in Tesco's marketing strategy. In tandem, they revealed, for example, attempts to frame the working conditions and the livelihood of farmers through Tesco price setting, described as leading to an unsustainable supply base and ultimately constraints to the value offered to consumers over the longer term.

Importation of multiple 'outsider' vocabularies

The third rhetorical strategy is termed 'importation'. This strategy was aimed at engaging with sets of institutions outside the immediate social movement field to gain external validity. The findings show how respondents configured a system of facts to confer legitimacy on their perspective. Actors used scientific language on their websites to establish 'unquestioned' authority and representation. They believed that by using scientific language in their reporting, they could represent 'a fact'. The social movement actors performed in this respect as qualified experts, accepting well-defined disciplinary parameters that represented the basis of their assertions, as emphasised in the following excerpt:

> We are not 'hug-a-hoodie' problem characters or warriors or even terrorists – that's how the media, large firms, and government officials like to portray and paint us in a stereotypical way. My wife and I are only just retired school teachers

> and, while we were reluctant at first to get involved, I have to say that we are committed now. Their [Tesco] jargon may sound good and suggest inclusivity. Our business model, however, is based on community sustainability and preventing large firms from tearing up our social fabric and then terrorising what is left of our community soul. We build boundaries around the things that we see as important, whereas firms want to dismantle those – separate us. Of course, that's never written in their sugar-coated mission statements. (A13)

In doing so, they assumed, and engaged with, technical rationality – that everyone with the same training, qualifications, and information would reach the same conclusions. Respondents deemed Tesco's marketing strategy as being unsustainable and that new possibilities and avenues must be opened up. At the same time, respondents and web archives revealed that academic research was imported to substantiate social movement claims. For example, the Association of Convenience Stores used academic research on retail diversity by the University of Stirling. Tescopoly.org used research commissioned by Agribusiness Action Initiatives (AAI) Europe, the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, and the Centre for Food Policy, City University. The porosity of the authoritative rationality was displayed through the use of ambiguous quantification such as Verylittlehelps.com's statistics centre, or Tescopoly.org listing 'over' 400 Local Campaigns on their website. Respondents believed that the imported rhetoric enhanced both their legitimacy and provided the appearance of trust and ubiquity: 'quantification points to a pattern, collaborating with other evidence . . . ' (A12).

Respondents also grasped the relevance to the social movement of importing business media reporting 'sound bites'. They explained that press releases were frequently issued with headline catching sound bites that sought impact by mimicking the dominant media discourse. IssueCrawler revealed that social movement actor websites were linked to hubs such as AlterNet, which represented an online community that creates journalism and amplifies the best of hundreds of other independent media sources. IssueCrawler results also revealed that media inter-links were an integral function of the social movement, notably the *Guardian* and *Times* newspapers in the UK, as well as more regional newspapers (e.g. Macclesfield-express.co.uk, southmanchesterreporter.co.uk, blackpoolgazette.co.uk). By importing media discourse, they were therefore able to frame controversies at the heart of their attempts to destabilise and delegitimise Tesco's marketing strategy. The gathering, storage, and dissemination of contentious information appeared to be significant in the building of affiliations as a critical part of this practice. A significant media link for the social movement was the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Actors embraced aspects of economic and commercial discourse by detailing disruptions and the number of viewers the BBC was able to attract. The network revealed a series of relationships between the sites which were all linked with the BBC website.

IssueCrawler found that social movement actors sought to navigate hot routes (via story lines) and access a network for attention. Significant in that activity appeared to be the way that sound bite headlines were linked to, and captured by, retail clichés (e.g. 'Trolley wars: How one market town (pop 7239) saw off Tesco'), humour (e.g. 'Talking shop: UK makes slow progress on grocery adjudicator'), or the seriousness of the plight (e.g. 'British farmers forced to pay the cost of supermarket price wars'). Respondents corroborated this by stating that sound bites sought global

scalability when targeting audiences, which ranged from farmers, workers worldwide, environment, food poverty, local shops' unhealthy food, and animal welfare. It also sought to embellish the cause or the fight and, in particular, the virtues of that practice (e.g. 'MPs battle to save the nation's high streets' or 'Loopholes and limp language leave town planning in limbo'):

> The media are obsessed with drama, drawing on conflict and tensions as the main source ingredients. We dramatise our message as much as possible for it to be picked up by the traditional media channels . . . However, we have more control over this now by using social media, and we try to create viral campaigns. (A7)

The social movement actors also drew on a broader discourse of anti-neoliberalism. Respondents stated that they focused on the 'predatory nature' of Tesco's marketing strategies in two ways. First, Tesco was increasingly linked to other anti-neoliberation causes, specifically Max Keiser of the Karmer Banque. Here, brand dominance was seen in a predatory light, with respondents using language such as 'corporate occupiers' or 'corporate holocausts', 'market distorting' to describe the acquisition of stores and the practice of 'land banking'. Respondents described this as Tesco's relentless opportunity seeking and promotion. It was this aspect of Tesco's marketing strategy led to Tescopoly.org and other international organisations such as Attac.org to contest Tesco's marketing strategy through the Internet. A second way in which the anti-neoliberal discourse worked was by linking Competition Authority decisions with the decline in small retail-sector offerings. Respondents pointed to the ongoing effects of Tesco's marketing strategy on rural retailing and urbanisation, and the declining status of British manufacturing, as well as of British employment practices:

> This is our community – corporations and their marketing frontmen seem to think . . . that they don't need our permission. Capital may let you acquire the sites or shops but it doesn't mean that the community needs to be complying. Communities and neighbours can act together and reverse this. (A2)

Discussion and implications

If contemporary marketing strategy textbooks reflect how to do marketing strategy (see, e.g., Day & Moorman, 2010; Hooley, Piercy, & Nicoulaud, 2008), then marketing strategy's conceptualisation remains an attempt to control and stabilise a firm's customer relationships and market involvement. Notwithstanding, research shows, for example, that deviant or dysfunctional customer behaviour in service encounters makes the work of marketing strategy in controlling and stabilising such relationships difficult for firms at best (Fisk et al., 2010). We emphasise the critical role of a range of multiple actors beyond the traditional firm–customer dyad in marketing strategy literature. These multiple actors form a social movement to destabilise and delegitimise a dominant firm's marketing strategy. In so doing, and for the first time that we can ascertain, marketing strategy is theoretically connected to social movement theory.

Sociological treatments such as this are shown to have relevance for marketing strategy thinking in incorporating web-based social networks of influence. We build on the work of Kozinets and Handelman (2004) while moving from their theoretical framing around the ideology and culture of consumerism towards a focus on

marketing strategy. Two interrelated contributions emerge: (1) mobilisation of networks of influence; and (2) rhetorical strategies. Given the lack of previous marketing research in this area, these contributions call for a broader conception of the dominant planning-implementation-control thinking in the marketing strategy literature. They could also go some way to addressing wider concerns that marketing lacks influence in academic and corporate discourse about strategy (Palmer & Simmons, 2010; Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009; Varadarajan, 2010).

First, the social movement proactively enrolled and mobilised a wide range of relevant actors as a network of influence, networked through a 'socio-epistemic engagement network' (Rogers & Marres, 2000, p. 5). The development and proliferation of Internet forums for the publicising of issues, the emergence and interconnected character of such forums and their actors, has been a focus of marketing research on brand communities (Cova & White, 2010; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; O'Sullivan, Richardson, & Collins, 2011). However, such studies have focused on the customer–firm or brand relationship in this respect. The findings of our study illustrate the ways in which an array of actors mobilise to form a social movement and a network of influence to contest and attempt to delegitimise Tesco's marketing strategy. We observed this mobilisation as the degree of transdiscursivity through the inter-linking and social movement network formation through, for example, website hyperlinks. The mounting of a website, the node, hyperlinks, the positioning of the site vis-à-vis other linkages in the network was critical. Rather than the marketing literature positioning marketing strategy as a stabilising force (with marketing managers planning and controlling exchange relationships with customers), these findings point to the World Wide Web as a mobilising and influencing network tool that can significantly destabilise and delegitimise marketing strategy.

The popular media can have a critical role in this, particularly with the rise of YouTube and associated viral channels online, in dramatising controversies around Tesco's marketing strategy, creating more attention and cohesion in mobilising actors. Rhodes (2002) discusses how the TV show *South Park* frequently 'mocks, satirises and undermines official institutions' (p. 294). In one episode on a dominant global brand 'Harbucks', parody is used to make contesting points about the way Starbucks performs marketing practices and business more generally. The media, and the BBC in particular, represented an important mechanism for the social movement in generating attention around their shared beliefs, values, and ideas. This focal media node in the social movement's network paths of meaning and influence appeared to act as a social cuing device for actors, creating focal points on disputes and disruption around Tesco's marketing strategy which, in turn, facilitated the mobilising efforts in the social movement to create a network of influence. Media hubs served this cuing function in several ways: providing information as an important element in achieving social movement actor coordination in information-oriented legitimatising rhetoric; compressing the universe of possible outcomes; and facilitating communication between actors. These cues helped to signal and coordinate outcomes and focus, and thereby reduced the prospect of non-coordination (see, e.g., Baum & Oliver, 1991). The Competition Commission or regulating authority could read the relevant cues as part of confidence-building measures, indicating, for example, whether the balance of regulation was appropriate. Contestation and the associated cues signalling tensions around Tesco's marketing strategies may translate into a greater willingness of regulatory agencies to undertake behaviours appropriate to the social

movement goals, potentially destabilising and delegitimising the marketing strategy of the contested firm in line with these goals.

Second, the role of rhetoric appears to be critical to the mobilisation of networks of influence in contesting Tesco's marketing strategy. However, the notion of rhetoric has received little to no explicit consideration in the marketing literature. This is perhaps surprising given that its potential as a destabilising, or stabilising, force on marketing strategy appears to be significant. The findings show how rhetoric may be employed as a powerful tool by social movements in contesting the marketing strategy of the dominant firm. The local context, for example, appeared to be a key battleground with the social movement's adversary in an attempt to alter the status quo around Tesco's perceived attempts through its marketing strategy to achieve market dominance. Three rhetorical strategies were identified: appropriation, association, and importation. There were clearly opportunities and risks associated with engaging with Tesco's market dominance in this way, which involved delegitimising the dominant logic of their marketing strategies and also building legitimacy and social acceptance of alternatives. A parallel may be drawn here with Thompson et al.'s (2006) study of a doppelgänger brand image of Starbucks. This oriented at one level around perceptions by coffee-shop patrons that Starbucks was a global firm which failed to connect to the cultural values of local communities and also sought in some ways through corporate growth to destroy them.

The social movement rhetoric suggests a focus of the rhetorical strategies on alternatives to the status quo of Tesco's marketing strategy, and was designed to persuade an audience. Pickerill (2007, p. 2682) notes that social movements are concerned with more than just contestation. They are also concerned with concerted efforts to create new spaces and legitimacy for operating in different ways. The findings point to evidence beyond the dualistic assumption that rhetoric is something distinct from (and opposed to) reality (Watson, 1995, p. 807). Rather, it was mutually constituting what the social movement actors *were doing* to influence legislative and regulatory frameworks, with the focus of delegitimising Tesco's marketing strategy and getting influential support for alternatives. We also found that the rhetorical strategies deployed by the social movement sought such transformation by making persuasive claims to powerful legislators and media to politicise and vilify Tesco's marketing strategy and legitimise change. Tactics of activating and developing momentum through transdiscursivity networks created the political resources for these constituencies with vested interests to enter the social movement debate and, in doing so, create institutional tensions for Tesco's marketing strategy. While some websites looked relatively impoverished, the results from IssueCrawler and the interview findings pertaining to rhetorical strategies deployed suggest strategic positioning was used by the social movement to sensitise the public, the media, and the state in forming and sustaining networks of influence.

For marketing managers, the implications of the study findings have relevance. Marketing success carries a cost. Marketing managers in dominant firms faced with a social movement attempting to destabilise and delegitimise marketing strategy may decide to ignore them and carry on regardless. However, we argue that the new realities faced by marketing managers in the digital and globally connected era need to be recognised in considerations of marketing strategy. Simmons (2008) details a number of Internet-based social mediums that present a threat to marketing strategies, including, for example, social networks, blogs, and the now ubiquitous user-generated content across a plethora of online platforms. For

marketing managers, marketing strategy needs to be viewed as no longer controllable and a stabilising force. It should also not be viewed narrowly through the lens of the firm–customer dyad. This calls for new ways of thinking about marketing strategy. New approaches may be based around finding ways of engaging, negotiating, and compromising with social movements and other relevant constituencies. In this regard, reference may be made to the recent work of Patriotta, Gond, and Schultz (2011) who elaborate a process model of institutional repair. This explains the active role of agents and the structural constraints they face in attempting to maintain legitimacy within controversies.

Conclusions and future research

This paper explores how web-based social movements attempt to influence the marketing strategy of a dominant firm. Rather than being a controlled and stabilising force for firms in their relationships with customers, marketing strategy is shown to lead to socially produced spaces where multiple actors may actively attempt to destabilise and delegitimise it. We show how the mobilisation of multiple actors in contestation is dependent on rhetorical strategies of appropriation, association, and importation. The implications of being a dominant firm such as Tesco, not least because of the highly visible nature of their marketing strategy, can impinge upon society at large. This can result in damaging public scrutiny, criticism, and contentiousness associated with their marketing strategy. In particular, the role of social movements has received little attention in the marketing literature. This study contributes to this while also presenting several avenues for further research.

A notable aspect of the findings relates to how social movement ideas and practices develop and sustain a network of influence through rhetorical strategies. Multiple actor voices and the way in which they interact to destabilise and delegitimise Tesco's marketing strategy were found to have significant influence (e.g. the press, industry associations, think tanks, the media, policymakers, or legislators). Further research is required to explore other social movements, as well as considering other environments beyond the retail environment of this study. A key question pertains to whether the range of actors involved will be similar to this study, and whether they will employ the same approaches in contesting marketing strategy. Also, moving beyond dominant firms as a study focus would provide new insights into how social movements seek to influence the marketing strategies of other firms large and small, or of public-sector and third-sector organisations.

Further study may also consider how social movements and their contestation are considered in the development of marketing strategy. Studies are needed to explore further the processes by which legitimacy in such circumstances is sought, or not as the case may be. It would be interesting to note what can be gained through new approaches to marketing strategy in seeking legitimacy for marketing strategies in similar circumstances to this study (see, e.g., Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002). Related to this, the orthodox understanding of discrete phases of strategy formulation followed by implementation has been more widely challenged by Mintzberg (1985) and subsequent studies in the management literature around strategy as practice (Jarzabkowski, 2003, 2004, 2005). Marketing strategy has tended to lag behind these theoretical developments, with greater engagement required with alternative understandings of marketing strategy. This broader literature has drawn

attention to the way that strategising is constructed through the actions, interactions, and negotiations of multiple actors – what actors do rather than what they should do. Not only is the Internet an important medium for Tesco to articulate marketing strategies, but it is also a web-based forum for a social movement to contest in the practice of marketing strategy. It would be useful to understand how large, dominant firms such as Tesco, Microsoft, Google, Facebook, BP, Shell, and Wal-Mart respond, or can respond, to social movements through the practice of marketing strategy.

Acknowledgements

The British Academy grant (SG-52497) funded the research upon which this paper is based. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for the time and thought they put into providing insightful comments on our paper.

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