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Enthoven, Margo P. M.; Thelken, Hendrik N.

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Activists' and social entrepreneurs' approaches towards consumer culture: Providing a protective space for sustainability transitions

Margo P. M. Enthoven^{1,2} | Hendrik N. Thelken²

¹House of Innovation, Stockholm School of Economics, Stockholm, Sweden

²Center for Sustainable Entrepreneurship, Campus Fryslân, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Margo P. M. Enthoven, House of Innovation, Stockholm School of Economics, Hölländargatan 32, 11359 Stockholm, Sweden. Email: margo.enthoven@hhs.se

Abstract

Social entrepreneurs and activists can contribute to sustainability transitions by influencing consumer culture. This can provide a protective space to shelter new sustainability solutions from market pressures until they are ready to scale to the mass market. We study how social entrepreneurs and activists within a sustainable market niche attempt to influence consumer culture. Using grounded theory, we analyse interviews with 26 activists and social entrepreneurs in the market for alternatives to animal products in the Netherlands. We find a synergy where social entrepreneurs' strategies pull consumers into sustainable consumption while activists' strategies focus push consumers out of unsustainable consumption. These strategies contain four tactics: connecting to, showing contrast with and broadening consumers' connection to values associated with sustainable consumerism and a radical innovation tactic. We show how strategies for consumer culture change interact on the niche level of sustainability transitions to create a protective space for sustainability solutions.

KEYWORDS

activism, consumer culture, market niche, qualitative, social entrepreneurship, sustainability transition

1 | INTRODUCTION

Niches play a crucial role in sustainability transitions because they provide a temporary protective space for new sustainability solutions by sheltering these from market pressures (Cramer, 2020; Kemp et al., 1998; Markard et al., 2012). Such niches can be (co-)created by entrepreneurs, corporations, governments and activists (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020; Loorbach & Rotmans, 2010; Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013), for example, public subsidies for sustainability innovations can provide a temporary shelter from price competition (Smith & Raven, 2012). Therefore, niches allow businesses to refine their sustainability solutions before introducing them into

mainstream markets (Geels, 2004; Hörisch, 2015, 2018). Once such solutions are introduced into mainstream markets, they have the potential to foster a sustainability transition (Hörisch, 2018; Loorbach et al., 2010; Schaltegger et al., 2016). While the sustainability transitions literature recognizes the importance of niches as protective spaces, it mostly discusses niche actorship in markets in which governments or corporations are customers (Bakker et al., 2015; Cramer, 2020; Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013). The sustainability transitions literature is thus far lacking knowledge on how niches are created in consumer markets (Smith & Raven, 2012).

Social entrepreneurs and activists are prominent niche builders in consumer markets, in, for instance, food, fashion and cosmetics

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markets (Balsiger, 2010; Weber et al., 2008). Specifically, while activists build a first supporter base of sustainable consumers for new sustainability solutions, social entrepreneurs introduce such solutions (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Roysen & Mertens, 2019). The entrepreneurship literature recognizes that entrepreneurs can be niche builders in sustainability transitions but provides limited insights on how entrepreneurs build niches (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016; Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020; Pel et al., 2020). Simultaneously, the sustainability transitions literature typically features only governments and corporations as niche builders (Kemp et al., 1998; Smith & Raven, 2012). Additionally, none of these bodies of literatures recognizes the role that activists play as niche builders. We respond to the lack of knowledge on entrepreneurial and activist niche building and focus on how social entrepreneurs and activists conjointly establish a protective space for sustainability solutions by influencing consumer culture.

Consumer culture provides protection for sustainability solutions by mobilizing a group of individuals who are willing to trade cost, convenience or performance of goods for more sustainable alternatives (Smith & Raven, 2012). However, it remains unclear how the efforts of social entrepreneurs and activist towards consumer culture come together (Georgallis & Lee, 2020). We therefore study how activists and social entrepreneurs try to influence consumer culture and thereby answer the call for research on actorship in niches and a bottom-up approach to sustainability transitions (Markard et al., 2012; Smith & Raven, 2012). We address the question: *How do social entrepreneurs and activists attempt to change consumer culture to provide a protective space for sustainability solutions?*

We study the strategies of social entrepreneurs and activists in the context of the market for animal products in the Netherlands and the niche that provides alternatives to animal products. These actors problematize the market for animal products and criticize its large-scale use of animals as objects of production for ethical, environmental, social and health reasons. Accordingly, the market for alternatives to animal products has grown significantly, yet still only occupies a niche. We studied this niche and interviewed 26 social entrepreneurs and activists and used a grounded theory approach to analyse how activists and social entrepreneurs influence sustainable consumer culture (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010).

We add new insight to the sustainability transitions literature by analysing how actors can establish a protective space from the bottom-up by influencing consumer culture. We extend the sustainability transitions literature by providing insight into the strategies that entrepreneurs and activists use to create a protective space based on consumer culture and their interactions (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020; Lee et al., 2018). Moreover, we provide detailed findings on the tactics that social entrepreneurs and activists use within the bounds of these strategies and on the workings of the relationship between activists and social entrepreneurs in sustainability transitions. Our results can be applied to other sustainability transitions with an entrepreneurship–activism base. For example, the market which unites the anti-plastic movement with social entrepreneurs who create alternatives to plastic.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Activists are those actors who transform shared ideals, concerns or grievances into organized contention (De Bakker & Den Hond, 2007). They represent or claim to represent a social movement, which is a shared belief about the preferred state of the world, that is able to mobilize into an organized collective to solve social problems (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). While social entrepreneurship is not defined by organized contention, it can be considered as organized action to solve social problems, just like activism (Santos, 2012), because social entrepreneurship is ‘entrepreneurial activity with an embedded social purpose’ (Austin et al., 2006, p. 1).

While both activism and social entrepreneurship are grounded in social goals, these terms refer to actors with different strategies, because these actors subscribe to different logics. Logics are the ‘socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality’ (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). Different logics cause actors to behave differently in markets, which leads to different outcomes for sustainability transitions. For example, regional policymakers across the United States have created structurally different market settings for waste management, due to a subscription to either pro-environmental or conservative logics (Lee & Lounsbury, 2015).

Even when groups of actors subscribe to the same social goal, they may operate according to different logics. In the distinction between activists and entrepreneurs, activists are typically described as operating based on an anti-establishment logic, and entrepreneurs as operating based on a market participation logic (Auld, 2020; Lee & Lounsbury, 2015; Mars & Lounsbury, 2009). Because social entrepreneurs and activists subscribe to different logics, they adopt different strategies and thus act differently in the market. However, the distinction between logics is not that straightforward, because actors often blend logics. For example, eco-entrepreneurs have been described to blend activist and market logics, due to activist ideals they subscribed to and therefore blend strategies in the market (Mars & Lounsbury, 2009).

A strategy is a contingent plan of action to achieve a particular goal, in our case, a sustainability goal (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010). The chosen strategy also defines which tactics are available to the activist and the social entrepreneur. These tactics are the residual choices open to an organization after choosing its strategy (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010). For instance, an activist who has chosen to adopt a strategy to contest the practices of certain corporations might adopt the tactics of framing the corporations' actions in a negative light using symbolism to attract media attention or boycotting the corporations' products (King & Pearce, 2010). Making the strategic choice to contest these corporations includes previously mentioned tactics but excludes the possible tactic of co-innovation to improve the corporations' sustainability impact.

While social entrepreneurs and activists adopt different strategies and tactics, the lines between activism and social entrepreneurship in

sustainable market niches are becoming increasingly blurred. For instance, the plant milk company Oatly uses slogans such as 'it's like milk, but made for humans', which uses a typical activist tactic of framing cow's milk as something that should not be consumed by humans. Therefore, they contest the practices of corporations while also marketing their own product as a superior alternative to cow's milk (Georgallis & Lee, 2020). Thus, some of the approaches of social entrepreneurs and activists overlap. Moreover, within the sustainable market niche, activists and social entrepreneurs target the same group of individuals. For social entrepreneurs, these individuals are consumers who take part in the market and buy their goods, while for activists, these individuals provide a support base for their political agenda (Balsiger, 2010).

A consumer culture consists of the values, norms, attitudes and logics of a group of consumers and denotes a social arrangement that is mediated through markets (Groening et al., 2018). It frames consumers' perceived possibilities of action, feeling and thought. Therefore, consumer culture influences which behaviour a consumer adopts over a sustained period of time (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Within a sustainable niche, consumers, social entrepreneurs and activists share an ideological affinity (Auld, 2020; Weber et al., 2008). This ideology relates to ideas about how society operates and how it should operate and provides the basis for a sustainable consumer culture (Durand & Georgallis, 2018). A niched consumer culture can gradually become part of the mass market, as sustainable consumption becomes more mainstream (Hörisch, 2018).

Niches are described as protective spaces in sustainability transitions that shield new sustainability solutions from selection pressures (Geels, 2010; Georgallis & Lee, 2020). There are many such pressures, which can, for example, take shape as low market prices, industry structures that protect corporations or public policy that hinders new sustainability solutions (Smith & Raven, 2012). In consumer markets, pressures such as low costs, high quality and convenience make it difficult to enter the market with new sustainability solutions (Balsiger, 2010; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). A niched consumer culture can enable a protective space by providing entrepreneurs with a consumer base that is willing to trade price, convenience and quality for sustainability. This gives social entrepreneurs time and resources to develop inefficient sustainability solutions into competitive products ready for scaling (Schot & Geels, 2008). It also provides a group of early adopters among which to test, redefine and improve sustainability solutions (Kemp et al., 1998; Smith & Raven, 2012). Once a sustainability solution ready to enter the mainstream market, the need for a protective space gradually falls away (Smith & Raven, 2012).

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Research context

The market for animal products is a primary example of a market in which both social entrepreneurs and activists contest corporations (Hörisch, 2018; Weber et al., 2008). Traditionally, the source of

contestation in the market for animal products is animal ethics but now also includes health, environmental and social concerns (Kay, 2015; Poore & Nemecek, 2018; WHO, 2015). Collectively, these issues indicate a common concern with the market for animal products. Although the contestation of animal products is a global phenomenon, we focus on social entrepreneurs and activists in the Netherlands, because it has its own culture in relation to the consumption and production of animal products (Fligstein, 2001).

Our focus on the market for animal products in the Netherlands includes food, fashion and cosmetics containing animal derivatives. This is a niche market with significant scaling efforts, and the social entrepreneurs and activists within it focus a significant share of their change efforts on consumers (NOS, 2019; Nu.nl, 2019). In the Netherlands, social entrepreneurs and activists have established political successes, including banning fur farming and improved animal welfare legislation (van der Zwan, 2019). They have also put considerable effort into changing consumer behaviour, with some successes. For instance, Dutch meat and fashion alternatives have gained sufficient market interest to be scaled to international markets (De Groot, 2018). Additionally, consumer attitudes towards animal products have changed, with 84% of Dutch consumers considering fur farming to be morally unacceptable and outdated (Kay, 2015). These changes show initial success of the strategies of social entrepreneurs and activists, which indicates that this niche market is entering a sustainability transition. Therefore, we believe that this is a fruitful context to study the strategies of entrepreneurs and activists.

3.2 | Data sources and collection

Our case features activists and social entrepreneurs who attempt to challenge the market for animal products in the Netherlands. We selected our respondents based on their relation to the mass market, their focus on consumers and their ownership of a firm, organization or activist campaign. We therefore included social entrepreneurs who produce alternatives to animal products or distribute and market such alternatives. They operate in several sectors, including food production, media, hospitality, fashion, cosmetics and events. The activists we selected have started their own organizations or started a new campaign against unsustainable practices in the mass market. We chose to include activists operating through a variety of organizational forms, including through NGOs and through smaller organized collectives. These include organizations that collect footage from slaughterhouses and farms, organizations that advocate animal ethics, organizations that protest against corporations and organizations that are mainly occupied with lobbying. We made sure that all respondents included in our study were operational, had a sustainability orientation and had a significant consumer strategy and that they self-identified as activists, entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial activists or activist entrepreneurs. This was established through initial email contact. We placed calls for interviewees in sustainability, animal ethics and vegan groups on social media and approached activist organizations and networks. Also, we used search engines to find interviewees and

TABLE 1 Interviewees, organization type and time operational

Respondent#	Activist	Entrepreneur	Organization	Operational ^a	Notes
E1		+	Food and drinks	6 months	Interviewed with E7
A1	+		Holistic ^b	6 months	
E2	Past	+	Food and drinks	1,5 years	
E3		+	Food and drinks	7 years	
AE1	+	+	Events	7 years	
E4		+	Fashion	6 years	
E5		+	Cosmetics	6 years	
E6		+	Food and drinks	3 years	
A2	+		Holistic	6 months	
A3	+		Animal ethics	10 years	
AE2	+	+	Food and drinks	1,5 years	
A4	+		Animal ethics	10 years	
A5	+		Holistic	16 years	
AE3	+	+	Animal ethics, research, media	12 years	
A6	+		Animal ethics	1 year	
A7	+		Holistic	6 months	
A8	+		Animal ethics	6 months	
E7		+	Food and drinks	6 months	Interviewed in tandem with E1
E8		+	Food and drinks	15 years	
E9		+	Food and drinks	16 years	Only notes, no recording
A9	+		Animal ethics	1,5 years	
E10		+	Food and drinks	3 years	
A10	+		Holistic	2 years	
E11	Past	+	Web shop	1,5 years	
A11	+	Past	Holistic	26 years, 2 years in the Netherlands	
AE4	+	+	Holistic	3 years	

^aThe time that they are operational in their current activity.

^bHolistic: those interviewees who are active for an overarching grand cause, for instance, global injustice. They are also active for other causes, for instance, LGBTQI+, the environment and anti-racism.

interviewed 11 social entrepreneurs, 11 activists and four individuals who identified as both activist and entrepreneur (see Table 1). Two interviewees insisted on being interviewed in tandem, so we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with 26 interviewees between January 2019 and June 2019. The interviews lasted between 22 and 54 min. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, except for one, of which notes were made.

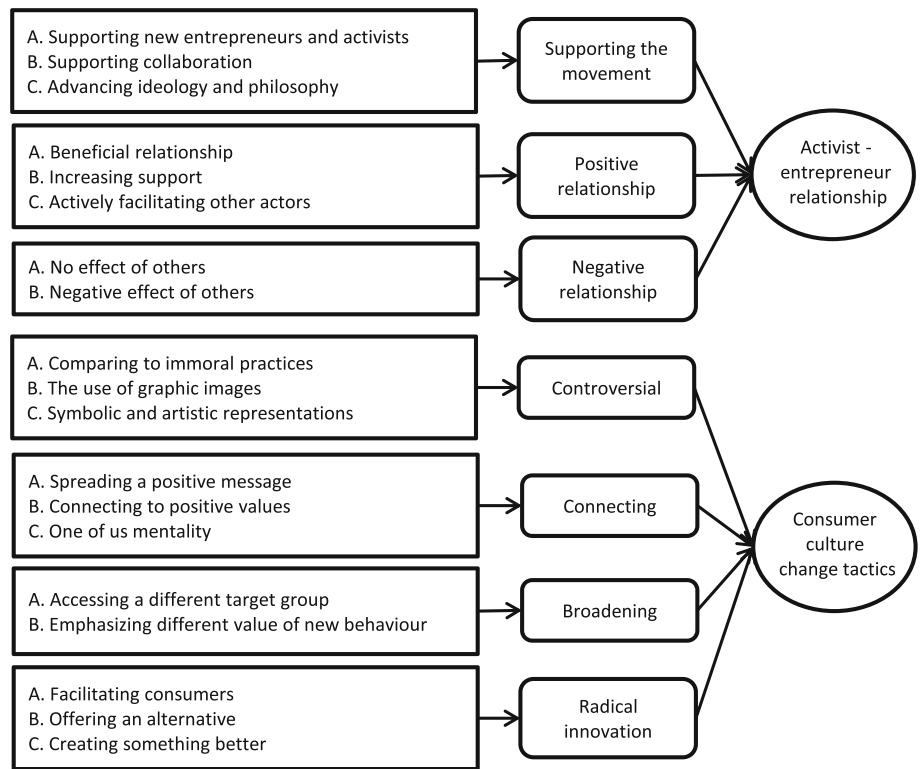
3.3 | Data analysis

We used a grounded theory approach to analyse our data inductively and thematically (Eisenhardt, 1989) and used the software Atlas.ti to code our data. Our point of departure for data analysis was contextualization, which means that we assumed that both the concept under study and its explanation came from the data rather than from theoretical inference or basic logic (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). Moreover, our premise was that

our dataset contains multiple explanations and that our goal was to arrive at the best explanation of the data (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010).

We used three rounds of coding to address our research question, with open coding for the first round, axial coding for the second round and selective coding for the final round (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We began by assigning first-order codes that came from the data rather than from theory, departing from the language used by the interviewees (Gioia et al., 2013). In the second round of coding, we searched for associations between the first-order codes and grouped them into second-order themes, which unite multiple first-order codes. Once our data yielded no more new insights, we proceeded to the third round of coding, in which we analysed the relationships between the second-order codes that emerged from the data to construct the conceptual link between these codes. We then compared our findings with existing theory to seek theoretical connection and discussed and theorized about the relationships between the highest order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). Figure 1 gives an

FIGURE 1 Overview of the data structure



overview of our coding process, and Appendix A shows additional examples of the quotes in which our codes are grounded.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Synergy between strategies

We find a synergy between the strategies of entrepreneurs and activists, which creates beneficial effects for both actors and supports the creation of a sustainable market niche. In this study, the activists and social entrepreneurs employ strategies to either push or pull consumers to behave according to certain values, norms and beliefs. These are aligned with sustainable consumerism and with the values, norms and beliefs of the activists and social entrepreneurs:

And also of course in my daily life, I try to see where I can change my personal behaviour, you know, with my consumption, my everything, and what I buy, what I consume. It's hard, it really is. We need a fundamental shift in our values and in how we look at the world on a larger scale [...]. AE4

The goal of the pushing strategy is to push consumers out of the unsustainable mass market for animal products by making consumers realize that their current behaviour is unsustainable. It is predominantly used by activists (10) and a few social entrepreneurs (3) and is intended to make consumers problematize aspects of their current behaviour and culture. Users of this strategy believe that consumers

lack the right information to act more sustainably but that they would change their behaviour if they had the right information:

Because I believe that when people have more knowledge about fur, at least the biggest share of people would not buy it anymore and would not wear it anymore. A3

A key feature of this strategy is therefore the communication of information that is predominantly negative:

I have to be a subject matter expert, I have to talk compassionately and tell about what's happening, why it's wrong and what are the solutions to this problem and why hunting is not conservation and why natural balance is important and why each life is important. Not, you know, mm bacon, but that was somebody's life, and they were scared, and they were hurt, and they did not deserve that. A11

Because this strategy has an element of judgement towards the consumer's behaviour, it is considered as negative by some social entrepreneurs and activists. One of the interviewees who considers herself to be both an entrepreneur and an activist experiences a tension between doing activism and running a business:

With the activist part—which you are also researching—I do not really protest much. Not because I do not want to, but because I have a company and if I

know that with you, my fellow entrepreneur, it also sticks to me if I go and protest somewhere every week. It can be positive, but it can also be negative. So, I try to be more neutral in that. AE1

Many social entrepreneurs refrain from using this strategy, because they generally believe that this negative connotation is bad for their business:

I choose consciously not to be an activist. I'm an activist in a positive way. I make veganism light, and bubbly, and cheerful, and friendly, and I inspire in that way. I do think that it's important that they are there, to shock, to show people the harsh truths, so that people think about that. But that does not fit with my business, we do everything in a positive way. E3

This quote also illustrates the aim of the pulling strategy, which is to show the consumer why sustainable consumption is attractive, rather than illustrating why unsustainable consumption is unattractive. This strategy invites consumers to engage in new behaviour rather than focusing on rejecting current behaviour. Users of this strategy believe that consumers will change their behaviour if they are introduced to a more attractive alternative behaviour. In our sample, both social entrepreneurs (11) and activists (7) use a pulling strategy, but social entrepreneurs use it more often and use a wider variety of associated tactics. Those who use this strategy consider it a positive strategy with the intention to pull consumers into the sustainable niche market.

Interviewees perceive pushing and pulling strategies as mutually strengthening and acknowledge that the different types of strategies that consumers are exposed to have positive but different effects. Therefore, some activists try to use both pushing and pulling strategies in conjunction. They acknowledge that the synergy of the push-pull mechanism arises when one actor uses both strategies but that it is also activated if different actors use the strategies independently. The synergy is considered to arise as follows: As activists try to push consumers out of previous behaviour and the mass market, pulling strategies of both activists and social entrepreneurs draw consumers into new behaviour and the sustainable niche market. This creates an iterative interaction, in which consumers confronted by the pushing strategies of activists search for alternative behaviours and become engaged in the pulling strategies of activists and social entrepreneurs. Vice versa, consumers confronted with pulling strategies are more easily convinced by the pushing strategies of activists, having already been introduced to a positive alternative for their—now considered unsustainable—practices. The push-pull interaction is explained by an activist as follows:

What I said, it's a good interplay. Because every time at the [outreach] we can say, you can now eat a very tasty meal in town, there and there, you know, and the supermarkets have a gigantic offering, even the big

brands are moving along. So, what happens on the supply side is super beneficial for us and hopefully everything we do with the [outreach] and the [non-profit] and [non-profit] and all those organizations contributes to the increased demand. Which is good for all those entrepreneurs who try to jump in that gap. A5

The push-pull dynamic that arises is considered beneficial for the advancement of the interests of the social entrepreneurs and activists that are part of this push-pull dynamic. For instance, this social entrepreneur illustrates how her pulling approach raises questions in relation to the negative characteristics of products in the mass market, which causes consumers to be more critical to the mass market and more sensitive to pushing strategies:

We had a hotspot a while back at [supermarket], the banner also hangs there, that says that we are 100% plant-based. That makes people go to [supermarket] to ask, 'what about the other deodorants?' I like that, so without pointing at other brands because that is not smart, I think. By saying that you are it [plant-based], people start asking questions. E5

This quote also indicates that consumers who have adopted values in relation to sustainable consumption will raise questions about the products of corporations in the mass market.

Not all interviewees perceive a synergy (2). One social entrepreneur considers the approaches of some activists as inappropriate and is afraid that it will affect her own legitimacy. This interviewee believes that telling consumers what (not) to do would backfire:

The preaching of veganism that happens a lot, I think that only backfires. Also, with vegan pastry, not like, leave the other one because it is bad, because of the bio industry et cetera, but rather like, we can also do it like this. E7

Moreover, one activist considers the efforts of social entrepreneurs as unethical because she perceives that sustainability goals are often sacrificed in favour of economic gains in entrepreneurial endeavours (#A1). Only these two examples are explicit about a negative relationship. In all other cases, interviewees perceive a neutral or positive relationship.

Although a pushing strategy is predominantly adopted by activists while social entrepreneurs mainly use a pulling strategy, the distinction is not clear-cut. Some actors only engage in either activism or social entrepreneurship yet use both types of strategy (7 activists, 3 social entrepreneurs). Others engage in both entrepreneurship and activism (4). Some social entrepreneurs engage in activism as an additional activity, but dissociate this from their business (3):

What I can also imagine is that if someone had a super tasty dinner here and did not miss any meat, and then

enters a discussion about veganism, that the perception is much looser, like, oh I had a tasty meal, so what are your arguments? That is what I want to do. What we do, we make it much softer. And I believe in activism very much. The cubes, vigils, tying yourself down, liberating, everything. I find it ethically sound. But I do not want it here in the restaurant. We have also participated in cubes; I have been to a vigil and if I have time, I will do it again. But there is a strong separation, the knife cuts on both sides, but a bit apart. AE2

Additionally, interviewees adopt other activities that advance their goals for change that lead to benefits for activists and social entrepreneurs. These include the (monetary) support of new activists and social entrepreneurs, building on the ideological foundation of the movement and supporting collaboration:

But I think you should especially see it as a whole. And that is really a thing at [organization], we collaborate and do so from the start. So, we are a platform, a house, really, in which other animal organizations can collaborate. AE3

For instance, some activists advance their movements' philosophical and ideological foundation through writing and facilitating discussions. They provide additional arguments to behave sustainably and consequently create legitimacy among a greater range of individuals. Arguments are not just constructed around a single rationale but around a range of topics, including animal ethics, health benefits of plant-based diets, social issues, and environmental issues. Parallels are also drawn with other movements, such as the feminist, LGBTQ+ and anti-racism movements. Therefore, actors, particularly activists, are continuously (re)constructing the ideology of their movement. Interviewees learn about these ideas at events that attract consumers, activists and social entrepreneurs alike. Essentially, activists and social entrepreneurs try to convince consumers to subscribe to the ideologies they already subscribe to themselves. According to one activist, advancing the ideology behind the movement helps to unify actors and prepare for a future in which sustainable consumption has become mainstream (#A10). Ideology links activists and social entrepreneurs and enables a shared opinion that the mass market is unsustainable. While their means may differ, interviewees share the goal to improve the sustainability of the mass market.

4.2 | Tactics for consumer culture change

The push-pull synergy is a mechanism that consist of both the higher order pushing and pulling strategies and the lower order tactics that are available within a higher order strategy. Interviewees employ a variety of tactics to influence consumer culture, some of which are used by social entrepreneurs and activists, whereas some are only applied by either. We find four tactics: (1) controversial tactics, which

TABLE 2 Overview of tactics, by strategy and actor

Tactic	Strategy	Actor
Controversial	Push	Activist
Connecting	Push and pull	Activist and entrepreneur
Broadening	Push and pull	Activist and entrepreneur
Radical innovation	Pull	Entrepreneur

are available under a pushing strategy; (2) connecting tactics and (3) broadening tactics, which can be a part of both pulling and pushing strategies; and (4) a radical innovation tactic, which is part of a pulling strategy (see Table 2).

4.2.1 | Controversial tactics

In our study, the controversial tactic is employed by activists (11) and one social entrepreneur. It involves shocking consumers with graphic imagery, the comparison of consumer practices to unsustainable and immoral practices and symbolic and artistic representations. An example of graphic imagery is the undercover footage from slaughterhouses that activists collect and publish. Additionally, the comparison to immoral practices can be the comparison of exploitation and violence in the animal industry to other cases of exploitation, such as the exploitation of women. A symbolic representation is, for instance, an event where activists dress up as animals and pretend to be dead (#A1). The following example shows activists using the comparison to unsustainable practices, a symbolic action, and the use of graphic imagery:

With Halloween, at McDonalds, they had this horror experience. Then we had a whole protest, like, if they want a horror experience, we can take care of that, we'll help them. So, we stood there with footage and sounds from slaughterhouses, and it was absolutely horrible to be there. A1

The connection of horror to slaughterhouses and McDonalds shows the connection of what they consider an unsustainable and immoral practice (violence towards animals) to the practices of McDonalds, its producers and its consumers.

Interviewees engage in controversial tactics to show consumers that certain behaviours are unsustainable and to urge them to stop behaving in this way. They show harsh truths behind consumer practices that they believe have been hidden by the industry and its institutions:

We also make footage of the animals, so that we can share with the world, to show that the piece of meat on your plate was more than just a piece of meat in plastic foil. That it was a living being that, well, lived [...] As activists we try to make people conscious, like,

look, this was your steak. This was an animal that you could have loved. A8

Visuals shock consumers, triggering a crisis in relation to their consumption practices. It can cause discomfort among consumers, who may construct a negative mental image of the activists involved to escape this discomfort. Due to the negative image associated with this tactic, social entrepreneurs refrain from engaging in this tactic. They believe it is not 'a positive approach' and think it will negatively affect their legitimacy. However, one social entrepreneur uses it and has found a way to distance herself from the negative connotation and used a controversial tactic that was well received:

First, I made a sausage that I presented at [Industry Event]. That sausage was 15 times longer than a meat sausage because you can grow 15 times more plant-based protein on a piece of land than animal protein. E6

4.2.2 | Connecting tactics

As opposed to shocking tactics, connecting tactics are intended to link sustainable consumer behaviours to positive norms and values that consumers already possess. Connecting tactics assume that consumers are open to changing their behaviour when presented with information that links to their values and norms. Compassion, justice and green values are often used, because interviewees believe that consumers have strong positive associations with these values. They show how sustainable consumerism endorses these values, while the notion that consumers' past behaviour is not in line with these values is implicit. In this sense, it can be employed as both a pulling and a pushing tactic. Accordingly, both social entrepreneurs and activists engage in this tactic, yet they do so in different ways. Activist (8) often engage in conversation with consumers. They do not contest the practices of consumers, but rather guide them to conclusions by asking questions:

If you really engage in conversation with someone, one on one or that you have a conversation with two people at the same time, and then it is a very pleasant and positive conversation, where you mostly listen to people and ask questions and that also when people have practical concerns you address that and try to be facilitating. A5

In contrast to activists, social entrepreneurs (6) choose brandings that indicate that their products connect to certain values (for instance, the slogan 'Buy with compassion' [#E11]). Social entrepreneurs also do that by showing consumers that they are on the same team:

So, every time I present, in the first two paragraphs I say I eat meat myself, but we have to do something

about it. We have to change something. And I see half of the room is relieved. Because often people think I come to school them or to change them and that is not what I am trying to do. E10

This social entrepreneur calls it the 'one of us mentality' (#E10).

4.2.3 | Broadening tactics

Like connecting tactics, broadening tactics are used by interviewees to engage consumers in what they consider sustainable behaviours rather than focusing on the negative aspects of unsustainable behaviours. Broadening tactics are predominantly employed by social entrepreneurs (9) and aim to normalize sustainable consumerism by circumventing the moral charge of the behaviour and preventing the consumer from being confronted with the difficult and conflicting task to make a judgment on the moral reasoning behind it. Instead, the behaviour is made to align with another value. For instance, a sustainable product is also tasty or stylish:

I had to persist and convince people that it is a cool product. And my concept is, I did not want to scream it is vegan, but that people think, hey what's that, then they see the product and then they see it is also vegan by coincidence. So that you also inspire a target group like, hey, we have an alternative for leather. That has been my strategy from the start, I am still not shouting 'we are vegan'. It is now a hype so I can imagine it can also be a commercial goal, but for us it is more on the background, because I want to inspire both vegans and non-vegans. E4

By attaching sustainable consumer behaviour to a non-moral argument, those who care about tasty or stylish products may purchase the product while avoiding engagement in a moral dilemma or avoiding discussion with peers on the moral nature of the product. The broadening tactic thus provides consumers with an alternative justification for engaging in sustainable behaviour. Interviewees who are morally or sustainably motivated may frame their products differently to appeal to a broader audience, which normalizes sustainable consumption by associating it with other norms and values that consumers already subscribe to:

What we try is not to come across as activist, and especially not vegan. We say, we are a vegan company, but the word vegan is not in our name. Our website is not green, but black. It looks cool and tough. Also, a lot of white of course, but black, that is tough. E11

Social entrepreneurs believe that this tactic may interest a new group of consumers for sustainable consumerism (#AE1, #E4 and #AE3). We consider this tactic as predominantly an entrepreneurial

tactic, but some activists also use this tactic (3), for instance, by associating sustainable consumption with positive health effects:

My idea is to do research to see how a plant-based diet can prevent and treat many diseases and such. But I'm doubting that approach a bit. Because then if people go vegan it is because of the wrong reasons, not for animal liberation. Same as with the climate. But I think, a lot of people may become vegan in this way, then look further, and think, oh shit, the injustice. A1

4.2.4 | Radical innovation tactics

Several social entrepreneurs (7) have engaged in a new venture because they believe to have found a superior solution to the problem that they are trying to address. Some of them (2) do not believe that consumer culture can change for sustainability reasons and therefore do not engage explicitly in tactics out of these reasons. However, most social entrepreneurs employ this tactic alongside other, more sustainably oriented tactics (5). Those who use this tactic feel that you should not ask a consumer to change if you cannot offer them a superior alternative. This tactic does not appeal to consumers' sustainability motivations, but to their economic, convenience and quality motivations. It facilitates consumers in their sustainable choices and therefore takes an enabling role:

I do not think you can get a real meat eater off the meat. I think lab-grown meat is a realistic alternative because it is meat without the downsides. [...] The goal is to solve the problems of meat and to move meat eaters to accept an alternative. There is no better alternative than the real product. E9

Some social entrepreneurs believe that with a small group of social entrepreneurs, they can have a large impact on consumers by offering products that are cheaper or have a higher quality than the alternative. The goal is to produce sustainable alternatives that are so good that mass market products become redundant. Although this approach does not aim to influence consumer culture, it can normalize

sustainable consumer behaviour among a large consumer group. Rather than a cultural tactic of consumer change, it is a facilitator of it:

So, I want for the people who are vegan, I want to make it as easy as possible to stay vegan and for people who are considering it and think, it is pretty difficult, I want to show, you know, it is not. As long as you have a place you can direct them to. And I want to facilitate that place. E11

Widespread normalization of sustainable consumer behaviour through radical innovation is believed to lower the social costs of engaging in sustainable consumerism. Respondents feel that if the consumption of one sustainable product becomes normal, this lowers the barriers for consuming additional sustainable products.

5 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We aimed to answer the following research question: *How do social entrepreneurs and activists attempt to change consumer culture to provide a protective space for sustainability solutions?* We find that activists and entrepreneurs adopt strategies—contingent plans of action to achieve a particular (sustainability) goal—that have a synergistic effect on consumer culture. Within their chosen strategy, activists and social entrepreneurs have a set of choices left to make, which are known as tactics (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010). Some tactics are not accessible to the other actor, but the tactics of entrepreneurs and activists have a complementary, mutually strengthening effect (see Figure 2).

To unpack this strengthening effect, we move back to the logics that activists and entrepreneurs subscribe to. These logics refer to actors' beliefs in how to best change an unsustainable system (Lee & Lounsbury, 2015; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). The social entrepreneurs we study believe that they can achieve change by participating in the market with new sustainable products and thereby adopt a logic of market participation (Mars & Lounsbury, 2009; York et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the activists in our study adopt a market contestation logic and believe that they can achieve change by delegitimizing unsustainable consumer practices (Auld, 2020; King & Pearce, 2010).

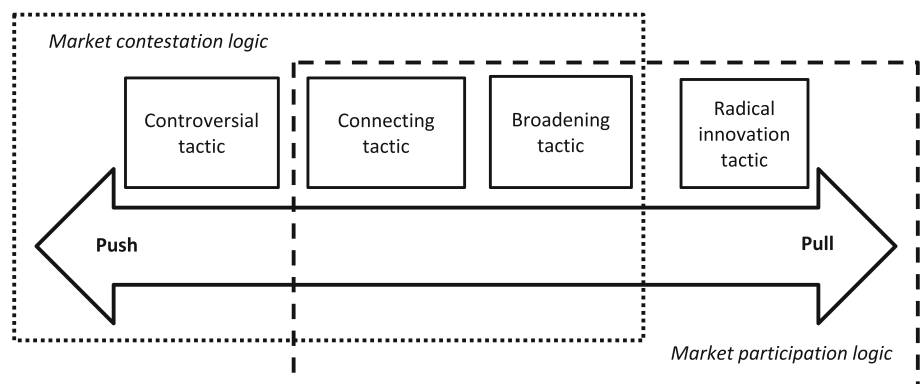


FIGURE 2 Market logics, strategies and tactics

Within these logics, activists use a strategy to push consumers out of their existing behaviour, values, beliefs and norms, while social entrepreneurs use a strategy to pull consumers into new behaviours, values, beliefs and norms. The tactics of social entrepreneurs complement the tactics of activists and vice versa. This synergy arises without coordination due to a shared ideology, which allows them to operate based on the same sustainability principles. It thereby provides a mechanism of coordination without explicit collaboration (Auld, 2020; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) (see Figure 2).

Some tactics are used only by either social entrepreneurs or activists. Activists' controversial tactic shocks consumers by exposing negative effects of unsustainable practices, for instance, by showing slaughterhouse videos. This tactic stimulates consumers with sustainability values and beliefs to problematize the mass market and consume differently. They thus become part of the niche, because it provides an alternative. This tactic is not accessible to social entrepreneurs because it would make them 'the bearer of bad news' and give their business a negative association among consumers. However, social entrepreneurs benefit from the controversial tactic of activists because it stimulates consumers to look for sustainable alternatives to replace unsustainable products contested by activists. Conversely, social entrepreneurs may use a radical innovation tactic, which entails offering superior products to replace unsustainable products. This tactic lowers quality, cost and effort barriers of sustainable consumption, thereby attracting a broader group of consumers to the niche. Activists do not use this tactic, because their market contestation logic excludes them from market participation. However, activists benefit from social entrepreneurs using a radical innovation tactic, because it creates alternatives to the unsustainable products that they delegitimize.

Other tactics of activists and social entrepreneurs overlap and have a mutually strengthening effect due to an increased exposure to consumers when these tactics are used by both actors. Connecting and broadening tactics align with both pushing and pulling strategies and are therefore open to both activists and social entrepreneurs. The connecting tactic links to values and beliefs that the consumer already possesses, such as compassion, and encourages consumers to align their consumption to these values. It fits in both a pushing and pulling strategy, because it causes consumers to consider both starting sustainable consumption and stopping unsustainable consumption in relation to these values. The broadening tactic provides consumers with an alternative, non-moral justification to consume sustainably, such as a health or luxury reason. This tactic is crucial to expanding the niche to include a diverse range of consumers, who may not have sustainability values, but enter the niche for other reasons.

The tactics of activists and social entrepreneurs thus help shelter new sustainability solutions from selection pressures by creating a base of consumers who are willing to consume sustainably (Smith & Raven, 2012). This protection allows entrepreneurs to refine their sustainability solutions after which these can be scaled from the niche to the mass market in the regime (Kemp et al., 1998). These solutions can then trigger a change in industry practice, policy, regulation and science and may eventually cause a societal shift (Geels, 2004).

Sustainability solutions challenge the unsustainable practices of corporations, because the sustainability solution signals that the mass market is unsustainable (Georgallis & Lee, 2020). Accordingly, corporations start competing with sustainable products to try to preserve their competitive advantage (Geels, 2010).

If the new sustainability solutions survive the competition, they become more prevalent in the mass market, lowering the barriers for consumers to reject unsustainable products. Accordingly, some corporations will also introduce sustainability solutions, creating a heightened level of sustainability in the mass market (Hockerts & Wüstenhagen, 2010). This pushes for industry standards and policies to change, with governments starting support schemes for a new group of sustainability solutions (Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013; York et al., 2016) and industry actors introducing norms such as sustainability certificates (Fligstein, 2001).

5.1 | Theoretical implications

We chose to discuss sustainability transitions in relation to consumer culture because of a lack of knowledge on this topic (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). We have dived deeper into the perspective of sustainable consumer culture as a provider of protective space for sustainability solutions within a sustainable niche (Smith & Raven, 2012). Based on this, our study makes two main contributions to theory.

First, we provide insight into the interplay of the strategies and tactics of social entrepreneurs and activists within a sustainability transition. While some work on interactions between activists and entrepreneurs exists in other literatures, the relationship between activism and entrepreneurship in a sustainability transition remained unexplored (Georgallis & Lee, 2020; Hiatt et al., 2009; Weber et al., 2008). Specifically, the sustainability transitions literature emphasized interrelations between corporations and governments, corporations and entrepreneurs and governments and entrepreneurs (Cramer, 2020; Hockerts & Wüstenhagen, 2010; Hörisch, 2015, 2018; Loorbach et al., 2010; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Our research builds on and extends this knowledge on the different roles and interrelations between actors in sustainability transitions by providing detailed findings on the synergy between social entrepreneurship and activism.

Second, we unpack an underemphasized, yet transformational way to provide a protective space for sustainability solutions. Due to the vested interests of corporations and governments, a sustainability transition can be hard to foster, but consumer culture provides a means to initiate change for actors who lack political or financial access (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Pinkse & Groot, 2015). We show how entrepreneurs and activists can acquire the agency to contribute to larger societal change and thereby add to the literature on sustainability transitions which has already shown how change can be fostered in other ways, including through policy initiatives, collective community effort and corporate innovation strategy (Hörisch, 2018; Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013). We discuss strategies and tactics for an alternative transition pathway towards sustainability.

5.2 | Practical implications

We have three recommendations for social entrepreneurs and activists who want to foster sustainability transitions. First, in niche markets with activists and social entrepreneurs, actors can use similar language in which the negative features of unsustainable consumption and the positive features of sustainable consumption directly oppose one another. Specifically, social entrepreneurs can brand their products as the opposite of the unsustainable products that activists contest. For instance, many activists condemn the consumption of meat as violent and cruel. Thus, opposite brandings that social entrepreneurs could use are cruelty free, non-violent or compassionate. Second, activist and entrepreneurial strategies do not always mix. Social entrepreneurs are in danger of becoming 'the bearer of bad news' where consumers blame them for their emotional discomfort, which reflects badly on business. Therefore, we advise that social entrepreneurs refrain from using shocking tactics in most cases. Finally, activists and social entrepreneurs could use broadening tactics to connect sustainable consumption to other types of consumption. For instance, they can connect to the health food movement or the feminist movement by arguing why sustainable consumption is also healthy or feminist and thereby attract a wider range of consumers to the niche.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

Despite its generation of new insights, this study has some limitations based on which we make four recommendations for future research. First, we focus on a specific movement in one country. While this movement is global, we may have generated findings that are specific for this particular context and that have limited potential to be extrapolated to other contexts, such as non-Western contexts. We recommend that future research addresses the conjoint strategies of social entrepreneurs and activists in other contexts. Second, we employ a relatively small sample of 26 individuals and believe that it is important that the strategies and tactics of social entrepreneurs are also explored in larger samples. Third, in this research, we have not been able to assess the effectiveness of each tactic for consumer culture change. Although we know that the market for sustainable alternatives to animal products in the Netherlands is established and growing, we cannot ascertain which specific actors and tactics were effective in the establishment of this niche. Future research may uncover which tactics are most successful. Finally, interviewees also identified bloggers and social media influencers, who could be activist, social entrepreneur or both, as actors facilitating a sustainable market. Although most interviewees are active on social media, none identify as influencers or bloggers. We recommend that future research analyses the role of online actors as facilitators of sustainable markets.

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APPENDIX A

Theoretical category	Exemplars from the data
Activist–entrepreneur relationship	
<i>Movement supporting</i>	<p>Then we have the expert centre, we are building an online knowledge centre, it is in an advanced stage, so we get a new website next week. And there it is so that, do you want to know something, then for fur you go to [organization], do you want to know something about the livestock industry, then you go to [organization] for figures and in that way I want to quantify animal abuse and take out the most important points and make them accessible to the public, so that if you are a journalist and are looking for information or you are making a school project or you are just interested, then we facilitate you online. And then you can see which organizations are specialized and which scientists for instance. AE3</p> <p>I also started my own MeetUp series, which is called [name] and what it is – its bringing together designers, developers and basically online campaigners, anybody working online and we are looking for a how to use these powers to build good things for the world ... and then of course, with the MeetUp, I to reach out to people who are already building on something that is changing, I try to connect them to like-minded people and see if that will help them grow. So if people would maybe do that more. AE4</p>
<i>Negative effect</i>	<p>Well, what does an activist do? An activist demands attention for a certain problem. So in one way I secretly am, with my product I ask attention for a certain problem. But to stand on the barricade and shout, ‘I don't agree with how we do that now, and listen to me’, maybe I am very cynical, but don't think that works very well. Do I think the guys from [organization] and [organization] are sympathetic? In principle, yes. But I think that [organization] has also become a company. To be an activist and in my way meand to make a core business out of my opinion and that may not be the right way, but the way I see activism I think, no, not on that topic. E8</p>
<i>Positive synergy</i>	<p>So, at the fair I try that if you walk around you see [the broad range of products and views]. By the bigger events like [event] and [event] we have done that for a couple of years. I try to put speakers there as well. So, if you come there, I try to vary with the somewhat more hardcore vegans to put it like that, well, you know [speaker]. He is a very explicit, clear man, he has a view, and he shares that. But there are also the more ‘light’ speakers. Those who go towards veganism but don't really put it so explicit yet. AE1</p> <p>We are always looking for companies to put on our fur free list. It is a list for consumers to see where they can shop fur free with confidence, because customers who want to shop free would rather also not buy from shops that have fur in their collection. Because fake fur and real fur look so much alike and there is a lot of misinformation given in shops. So, the fur free list also offers clarity. And we also actively approach shops to get on the list. We already have more than 300 companies on the list for the Netherlands. A3</p>
Tactics	
<i>Shocking</i>	<p>[...] One of the comparisons we often make, that is a real eye-opener, there is no circumstance imaginable in the Netherlands in which cats and dogs would go to the slaughterhouse, so that works well for many people. Just like the question: ‘could you kill an animal yourself?’ or ‘would you want to work in a slaughterhouse?’ Yes, so most people wouldn't, at least the majority. That is something that makes people think. A5</p> <p>Another branch of [organization] is the advertising. So, what we do on the other side is to draw attention to the animal welfare problems in livestock farming. And we do that for example with research and press releases, so concretely that means that I make radio commercials, newspaper commercials or that I work on welfare research to draw attention to malpractice. At the moment, for instance, Im working on ‘don't eat an animal day’. A6</p>
<i>Connecting</i>	<p>I have never shouted it from the rooftops. And some people say, you inspire me just because you are like that and you don't push me. That makes me some kind of information disseminator without obligation, yes. E4</p> <p>But also that we despite all the ... in the fur industry that we can still have a positive message. Because the only thing you need to do against fur is to not buy it and not wear it. And that is actually very easy because you can still look very nice without fur. And you don't have to be cold because the alternatives are endless. And in that way we can have a very positive message. A3</p>
<i>Broadening</i>	<p>So, soon I will go to a health fair and there is a bit a broader audience there, who I think will be open for it, but didn't really know it yet. E5</p> <p>And additionally, it was about making fun flavours. I found ice cream flavours boring so I started to combine crazy things ... Fresh ginger root for instance, what does that. Coffee Cardammon for instance, those are flavours that I know from other things and I thought it would be fun to translate those to ice cream. Just trying crazy things. So, if I make a drawing now, of what are the USP of the brand then I draw a circle on top of which is flavour. I have customers in [location] who have been selling our ice cream for years and it sells just as well as our two big competitors, which are [company] and [company]. Then I ask, you sell a lot of ice cream to people, and to whom? And they say foodies, people who like tasty food. So not vegan, no allergens. But, well, that is on top of the circle, flavour. Exotic, pure, tasty, fun. E8</p>

(Continues)

Theoretical category	Exemplars from the data
<i>Radical innovation</i>	<p>I think also that, you always have to offer people an alternative, that you can stimulate people in that way. If you say, you have to eat vegan, the entire diet, then they must change so much all in once. I think that's a bit unrealistic. I think that instead if you say, o you like cake, great, that can be vegan. But then you need to maintain the same quality or even better. E1</p> <p>One of our campaigns here is to replace animals with alternatives. So there are a lot of alternatives out there and that is a great opportunity for technology, for engineering, for biologists and different experts to get together and come up with different ways and alternatives and new science and technology that they can share with the world that could create jobs and that could create better health for humans and better health for animals, but would create jobs in industry and things that could help people in many ways. A11</p>