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# Exploring brand activism practices of small businesses.

A multiple case study in the craft  
food industry.

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**Title**

Exploring brand activism practices of small businesses. A multiple case study in the craft food industry.

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**Abstract**

In today's marketplace, consumers have increased their attention to brands that engage in socio-political issues. Brand activists are purpose- and values-driven companies that direct their efforts to achieve certain socio-political goals. While previous literature has explored brand activism in larger companies, research on brand activism in smaller companies lacks the same theoretical depth. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand the practices of brand activism within small businesses and to explore what role communication has. The research uses previous literature to create a multiple case study on five small brand activist businesses in the craft food industry. Semi-structured interviews were used as a qualitative method to collect the empirical data. The research resulted in three main insights. First, practices of brand activism in small businesses were prominently driven by co-creation and the local community. Second, communication acts as the synchronization of the practices and bridge the divide between a small brand activist's corporate practice and their activist marketing message. Third, small brand activists use the circumstances to be a small actor in the socio-political market as an asset to create activist practices that capitalize on the benefit of smallness. The paper contributes with a new theoretical understanding of the practices to build stronger relationships to obtain and retain consumers.

**Keywords**

Brand Activism, Branding, Small Businesses, Craft Food, Community, Co-Creation, Purpose-driven organizations

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# 1. Introduction

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Consumers have lately started to express how conscious they are of social and political discrimination by basing their purchase decision on their beliefs. They support brands aligned with their own values and reject brands that are not. Up to a third of consumers, especially young ones, make purchase decisions based on a higher purpose and principal values and show greater interest in brands that commit to address social issues and support political movements. Therefore, consumers demand brands to use their power to create positive change in society, such as the creation of a more diverse society and the education of racial injustice (Mirzaei et al., 2022). As a result, brands and enterprises have increasingly become activists, and thus, have incorporated social and political issues in their marketing campaigns as well as incorporated them into their practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Brands that engage in activist issues have been described in different ways. Moorman (2020) explained political activism as public speech or actions focused on political issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name. Vredenburg (2020) added to this definition, and explained brand activism as a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on socio-political issues to create social change and marketing success. These brands address a controversial, polarized, or contested socio-political issue which could either be progressive or conservative in nature, and contribute to this socio-political issue through brand practice and messaging.

It is easy to confuse brand activism with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) since the two areas share some similarities. However, brand activism differs from CSR in two major ways. Firstly, CSR emphasizes actions and the consequences of those actions rather than contain brand values like brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, brand activism is superior to CSR when a brand is to strengthen its values. Secondly, CSR actions are viewed as beneficial for a major part of society, while brand activism generally often does not include a universally “correct” response to the sociopolitical issues involved (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consequently, a brand activism strategy may reach a smaller target group, but may also strengthen the values of the brand more than CSR, making it possible to better reach the target group.

One company that takes a non-neutral stance on a socio-political issue is the ice cream makers Ben & Jerry’s, which has welcomed activism around economic, social, and product quality

values since the 1980s. Its attention to quality craft products has resulted in sustainable food systems, the use of fair trade products, and opposition to the use of bovid growth hormones. Therefore, Ben & Jerry's buy its supplies from farmer cooperatives (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Its product *Dublin Mudslide* is for example made with spirit from a sustainable, women-owned spirit company that uses upcycled ingredients from the dairy industry (Ben & Jerry's, 2022, a). The premium ice-cream makers' activist messaging aligns with the well-defined long-term pro-social practices that support its purpose and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, its purpose, values, and practices is not enough for the company. In their communication on their social media channels they post political and social activist messages such as "*Transgender Rights Are Human Rights*" and "*Refugees Welcome*" (Ben & Jerry's, 2022, b).

Even though brands can express certain values in their communication towards their consumers to create marketing success, to become an activist brand has its risks. As consumers have become increasingly polarized in their political views, brands risk to alienate consumers. Consumers tend to have a negativity bias, which means that brand activism would repel misaligned consumers more than attract aligned consumers (Hydock, et al., 2020). With that in mind, a brand might lose more consumers than it would gain. Only 27.8 % of marketing leaders report that it would be appropriate to use marketing communications to speak out on political issues. In contrast, 47.2 % of marketing leaders report that it would be appropriate to make changes to products and services in response to political issues, at least in bigger companies (Moorman, 2020). Moreover, brands are perceived as authentic when they align their prosocial corporate practices to their activist marketing message (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are described as enterprises that employ fewer than 250 persons and have either an annual turnover of less than EUR 50 million or an annual balance sheet total of less than EUR 43 million (European Commission, 2020). More than 95% of enterprises across the world are SMEs, which contribute up to 60% of employment and up to 40% of GDP (Dabić, et al., 2019). Furthermore, SMEs represent 99 percent of all businesses in Europe (European Commission, 2020), and are the base of both national and international economic systems. However, it is only recently that SMEs have started to compete with larger multinational enterprises (MNEs). When the world becomes more competitive and globalized, SMEs need to look outside of their national borders to survive (Dabić, et al., 2019). On one hand, small businesses face big challenges in their quest for business as many experience financial problems, research troubles, restrictions in innovation, or environmental regulatory challenges (European Commission, 2020). SMEs will in this study be called small businesses.

On the other hand, new technology and in particular the internet (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014), has created opportunities for small businesses to grow. Internationalization strategies have become more accessible to small businesses as remote work, mobile apps, artificial intelligence, and social media have provided them with agile tools for expansion and internationalization. Physical distances have been reduced, which has resulted in better reachability for markets, users, and consumers (Dabić, et al., 2019). Furthermore, when small businesses reach their consumers more easily, they have the potential to create marketing messages that better suit the intended target group. The marketing mix and firm characteristics are two determinants of international performance for small businesses (Falahat et al., 2020). Thus, when brand activism is incorporated in the marketing mix and the firm characteristics are built upon a stance on a socio-political issue, international performance for small businesses can increase.

However, to be able to attract new consumers, small businesses need to communicate their brand activism and thus, their values effectively. *The process of communication* is a theory often used in marketing to effectively reach out to consumers. The theory explains that the receivers perceive information from other companies as noise. Therefore, it is crucial for a brand to create strong messages that are easily distinguished from the noise (Fill & Turnbull, 2019). Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as a communicational strategy used to influence consumer behavior and highlights four discernible traits through which activist brands communicate. Thus, Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) suggested that there is no direct approach for brand activism to be communicated by brand activists.

## **1.1. Problematization**

Researchers agree about the risk brands take when they enter the public debate (Key et al., 2021; Hydock et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Mirzaei et al. (2022) had a positive view of the concept and claimed that genuine motives and commitment to the brand help consumers build a stronger emotional affiliation with the brand. In contrast, Mukherjee and Althuisen (2020) have condemned brand activism altogether due to the economic risk of either being perceived as unauthentic by aligned consumers or getting boycotted by misaligned consumers. Authenticity has received increased attention in brand theory in recent years due to the emerged demand from the younger generation (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Oh et al. (2019) argued that authenticity has become such a significant driver that it has overtaken quality in the selection process, just as quality once overtook cost. Authenticity plays an essential condition in brand activism for brands to be able to reap the benefits of addressing social issues (Hydock et al., 2020). Fritz et al. (2017), stated that further research is needed in the field of indexicality, which



is a linguistic expression that alters in different contexts for marketers to get a greater insight to what determines authenticity.

However, the use of activism for brand and marketing purposes has raised skepticism from wary consumers who argue brands always have profit-seeking motivations (Mirzaei et al., 2022). While brands may have good intentions behind their socio-political engagement, marketers are pressured to find strategies that reflect their brand values to establish consumer trust. Mirzaei et al. (2022) explored some of the drivers for authenticity in the context of brand activism yet underlined the importance to further explore the relationship. Vredenburg et al. (2020) have presented a typology of brand activism which dictates that brand activism derives from four different forms. The concept of authenticity has also received criticism. Thompson and Kumar (2022) argued that consumers' perception of authenticity is not homogenous as research initially stated. According to Thompson and Kumar (2022), consumers use different standards when evaluating different industries. Authenticity should instead be viewed as an ongoing process in which brands strive to maintain certain contingent relationships, not simply compromised by principles that separate the real from the fake.

In brand activism research, polarization is highlighted as a key condition in the current marketplace (Hydock et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The increased divide between customer ideologies is argued to be derived from the importance of self-congruence, as consumers want a fit between their self-image and brand personality (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) argued that there is an asymmetrical effect on consumer attitude when brands get involved in controversial issues. Yet they recognized the value of self-identification in branding practices. Hydock et al. (2020), explored whether brands ultimately gained or lost when they entered the socio-political discussion. The authors found that there is a potential for small share brands to use activism to gain market traction.

Craft brands that are usually small have naturally become educators in socio-political questions to inform consumers about the impact of the choice consumers make (Cadby et al., 2021). Fernandes and Saraiva's (2022) findings suggested that the increase of sustainable brands is a result of the emergent demand from highly informed consumers. Verain et al.'s (2021) research found that there are two sustainability motives companies can follow. Jaegera et al.'s (2020) research provided several key characteristics of craft beer drinkers and why they choose craft beer as a preferred option.

Previous research has explored how different types of liabilities affect small and medium sized businesses (Gimenez-Fernandez et al., 2020; Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021). Smaller businesses were found to differ from big multinational corporations in the communicational reach, resources available, and the pool of responses to their branding action (Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021). Hence the difference, smaller businesses cannot necessarily use insights from current brand activism research to successfully create a brand activism strategy. Therefore, it is important to cover brand activism from a smaller business point of view. This research can contribute to an increased understanding of how smaller businesses practice brand activism and what role communication, market size, and corporate engagement have. Furthermore, this research can serve as insights for smaller businesses when they decide to pursue a brand activism strategy.

The growth of brand activism has supplied up-to-date literature that covers the practical and theoretical implications in multinational businesses. However, research has to the best of our knowledge not studied how small businesses practice brand activism and what practical implications it has for the brand. Even though big companies such as Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia are well-known brands that engage in brand activism, small businesses actively engage in socio-political issues too. Small businesses contribute to the majority of the World's GDP (European Commission, 2020), which makes the directed attention towards their practices an essential field to cover. As most previous research has neglected the insights small businesses have in the context of brand activism, we argue that the research field is incomplete. To address this gap, this paper will research how several small businesses practice and communicate brand activism.

## **1.2. Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand and explore the practices of brand activism within small businesses and the results of these practices. We also aim to find what role communication has in the practice of brand activism in small businesses to explain and build on the gap in previous research.

## **1.3. Research Questions**

How does the practices of brand activism look like in small businesses?

What role has communication?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

*This chapter starts with the explanation of fundamental previous and recent research on brand activism of interest to this study. Important research to understand brand activism is presented in this first part. The chapter then continues with the explanation of the concept of strategy as practice, which will be relevant to this study that regards the practice of brand activism in small businesses. The theoretical framework will act as a point of departure for our research.*

### 2.1. Brand Activism

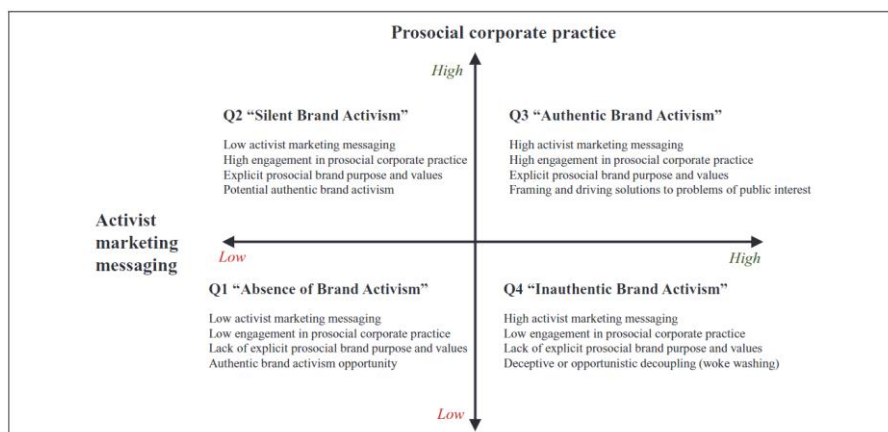
In this sub-chapter, the different core elements of brand activism of importance to this study will be presented. The sub-chapter includes *authenticity, the effect of company size, the effect of consumer behavior, the effect of socio-political food consumption, and brand activist's communication.*

#### 2.1.1. Authenticity

Many studies agree that brand's perceived authenticity plays an important part in strategic brand management and the advancement into the public discussion (Hydock et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2019). Vredenburg et al. (2020) have presented a typology of different levels of brand activism, where brands can either be absent, silent, authentic, or inauthentic. The authors divide the model into four different quadrants, which are separated by a y-axis and an x-axis. The y-axis determines the prosocial corporate practice from low to high. The x-axis determines the activist marketing messaging from low to high.

**Figure 1**

*Typology of Brand Activism*



*Note.* Retrieved from Vredenburg et al. (2020)

In the bottom left of the model (Q1), where prosocial corporate practice and activist marketing message are low, *absence of brand activism* is found. The brand thereby neither partakes nor communicates any brand activism and has yet adopted prosocial corporate practices, prosocial brand purpose and values, or use of activist marketing messages. Brands found in this quadrant operate without consumer expectations to become involved in brand activism. Usually, these brands operate in industries that do not traditionally depend on sociopolitical issues. However, these brands have an opportunity to become authentic brand activists (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and gain consumers from it, especially if the brand is a small business. Furthermore, Vredenburg et al. (2020) presented that as the demand for brand activism is on the rise, brands with *absence of brand activism* may need to adopt prosocial brand purpose, values, corporate practices, and activist marketing messaging.

In the upper left (Q2), brands have a high level of prosocial corporate practice, but a low level of activist marketing message. These brands practice *silent brand activism*, where they actively incorporate it into their business but do not market themselves as brand activists. These companies embrace socio-political issues as part of their core mission, business idea, or strategic focus, but operate their brand activism behind the scenes. Such brands are usually smaller and thus, have less brand power on the market even though they are heavily invested in socio-political issues. These brands also have a high opportunity to become authentic brand activists, since they already have the prosocial corporate practice, values, as well as brand purpose, and only need to incorporate an activist marketing messaging (Vredenburg et al., 2020). With the same logic as for brands with *absence of brand activism*, *small silent brand activists* have a lot to gain to become *authentic activists*, since it is the messaging that gains the new consumers that have congruent values.

In the bottom right (Q4), brands have a low level of prosocial corporate practice and lack brand purpose and values but still embrace a high level of activist marketing message that communicates support of socio-political causes. These types of brands are *inauthentic brand activists* since they do not back up their activist communication, and thus, can be perceived as insincere or deceptive. These brands tend to be consumer-oriented and attempt to respond to increased consumer expectations that brands should take a stand on socio-political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). More than half of consumers believe that brands' involvement in socio-political issues is simply a marketing ploy to sell more products (Mirzaei et al., 2022), which could imply that brands use an inauthentic activist marketing message. False messaging

is also unethical as it can involve misleading claims that result in consumer distrust (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, brands that are inauthentic in their brand activism may risk to lose consumers. This could be especially true for small businesses that have a small consumer group. If they lose their current consumers as a result of inauthentic brand activism and distrust, they may find it difficult to find new consumers since they no longer are trustworthy and known to be deceptive. These brands can be considered accountable for woke washing, which is a common term for inauthenticity in activism.

However, in the upper right (Q3), brands have both a high level of prosocial corporate practice and activist marketing message, and thus, are *authentic brand activists*. Authentic brands are perceived as authentic because their brand purpose and values, activist marketing communication, and prosocial corporate practices are aligned (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This form of brand activism was according to Vredenburg et al. (2020) greater than the other forms for two reasons. Firstly, it aligns the activist marketing message truthfully with purpose- and values-driven prosocial corporate practice to promote social change. Secondly, it delivers the best brand equity outcomes. *Authentic brand activism* serves as a signal of position of a socio-political issue. When this signal is credible and trustworthy, it can lower consumers' search- and information-costs and perceived risk associated with the choice of a brand. The picture of the brand in the consumers' minds is in other words clear and aligned with the true brand values, which leads them to align with the brand. This makes the consumer perceive that the brand adds value.

Moorman (2020) confirmed Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) authentic brand activism and presented different views on brand activism, in which brand authenticity is one. The brand authenticity view emphasizes that brands should not be political unless they can do so in a brand-consistent way that authentically connects with target markets. To divulge beyond this could seem inauthentic and cause consumers to question the brands' motivations. Vredenburg et al. (2020) continued to state that when a brand is ethical and true to its values and purpose, these actions become linked with the brand as part of the understanding that consumers hold of the particular brand. As a result of being true to its values, businesses have the potential to increase their brand equity and create long term market outcomes. Authentic brand activists build brand equity with the current campaign as well as increase the probability of future successful authentic campaigns that leads to brand equity.

This could be especially important for small businesses who build their brand and company to increase their market share. The need for future success in both financial- and brand terms is

crucial for small businesses to grow. Finance, research, and innovation are according to the European Commission (2020) examples of reasons for small businesses market failures in the European Union. This would suggest that small businesses could not only adopt a brand activist strategy but also be authentic in their practices and align their activist communication to gain new consumers and create long-term success. With authenticity, small businesses can also reduce the risk associated with brand activism and thus, maximize the gain of new consumers.

### **2.1.2. The Effect of Company Size**

Not only does the level of authenticity affect the success of brand activism, but also the market share. Consumers have become more polarized in their political views which presents a risk for brands to alienate consumers. However, Hydock et al.'s. (2020) research has shown that the net effect of brand activism can hurt large share brands and benefit small share brands such as small businesses. To have few existing consumers to lose and many potential consumers to gain can offset the risk associated with the loss of consumers that do not agree with the brands' values. Thus, a small business can gain market size by engagement in brand activism.

Hydock et al. (2020) suggested that consumers are attracted to brands that showcase the same identity and values as their own but are also dissociated with brands they do not agree with. However, the authors explained that consumers have a higher tendency to do the latter. The *negativity bias* term suggests that consumers have a higher tendency to stop support and buy products from brands with values that are misaligned with their own values than to start support and buy products from brands with values that align with their own values. For the brand, this generally means that the likelihood to lose a misaligned consumer due to brand activism is higher than it is to gain a new aligned consumer, which suggests that brands would not gain from a brand activism strategy. These findings are based on what Hydock et al. (2020) have called the individual level.

Nevertheless, Hydock et al. (2020) suggested that if these effects are aggregated at the market level, certain brands can gain and benefit from brand activism. Small share brands would overall gain consumers because of the few consumers they lose and the many consumers they gain. The authors presented that the proportion of the non-consumers that have aligned values with the brand will be larger than the proportion of the consumers that have misaligned values with the brand. The *negativity bias* would thus be offset, which results in growth for the smaller brand. The large share brands would however find themselves in the opposite position. This presents an opportunity for small businesses not currently using brand activism as a strategy. If

small businesses would implement authentic brand activism, these enterprises could grow and at the same time create social change.

Small business operations are although often more vulnerable to competition due to their limited capabilities (Falahat et al., 2020). The *liability of smallness* concept explains that these challenges are due to small businesses' lack of an abundance of resources that restrict them to devise strategic maneuvers. These restrictions are in terms of a company's overall finance, skilled labor, and difficulty to make high-interest payments (Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021), which the European Commission (2020) also confirmed. This is aggregated by the *liability of newness* which reveals that most consumers have a bias towards long-established companies. Smaller businesses are perceived to have lower legitimacy and have yet to establish close relationships with consumers, suppliers, and partners. Furthermore, it takes time to build efficient routines and lucrative business structures (Gimenez-Fernandez et al., 2020; Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021). To compensate for these dilemmas, small businesses are driven to foster innovation and novelty to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage. Subsequently, brand activism can be seen as a course of action small businesses can take to influence and overcome these consumer purchase behaviors and challenges.

### **2.1.3. The Effect of Consumer Behavior**

The risk to alienate existing consumers is argued to be the expressed reason why many managers are reluctant to take a stand on divisive socio-political issues (Hydock et al., 2020). The *negativity bias* discounts the consumers from positive information. The psychological principle of this concept demonstrates that individuals tend to value and be more affected by adverse events to a greater extent compared to that of positive events (Wu, 2013). Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) added to Hydock et al.'s (2020) findings and discovered a similar asymmetric effect on consumer attitudes when brands use activism. They further explained that when a consumer disagrees with a brand's value it leads to a decrease in consumer-brand attitude, but when a consumer agrees with a brand's stance it had little effect on brand attitude. The research of Hydock et al. (2020) did however challenge the statements made by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) and suggested that while the asymmetrical effect is present, small businesses have an opportunity to avoid the negative effects.

The reason why consumers choose to support certain brands can be explained through the self-congruity theory. The theory is used to understand and predict how consumers behave by examine how they view themselves (Wijnands & Gill, 2020). According to Islam et al. (2018), consumers do not only buy products to fulfil their essential needs but are also actively searching

for brands with values that align with what they represent. The self-congruity theory states that consumers cognitively try to match their social and cultural self-concept with a brand that has a congruent image. Accordingly, consumers try to avoid brands with low self-congruency that do not match their ideological alignment (Zogaj et al., 2020). While non-controversial issues give little to challenge consumers' moral foundation, brand activism provides consumers with an outlet to conceptualize their brand-self similarity through its divisive position (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Several studies have found that perceived self-congruency has a positive effect on consumers' perception and behavior through similarity attraction theory (Islam et al., 2018; Wijnands & Gill, 2020; Zogaj et al., 2020). This is of importance because consumers tend to have a superiority complex in their moral beliefs, and it takes significant time and capital for brands to convince them to change their position (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Thus, it can help small businesses understand how to communicate to influence individual behavior.

#### **2.1.4. The Effect of Socio-Political Food Consumption**

The food choice process is rather complex in nature due to all factors that accumulate in a purchase, such as socio-demography, culture, taste, and values (Verain et al., 2021). The exploration of identity consumption has allowed researchers to gain greater insight into consumers' spending patterns, especially when faced with brands involved in socio-political issues (Fernandes & Saraiva, 2022). The rise of identity consumption has enabled consumers to define themselves through the food they choose to eat and drink, which is especially true in the realm of sustainability (Ledin & Machin, 2020; Swenson & Olsen, 2018).

The emergent awareness of the impact the food industry has on the environment has created a segment of consumers that demand more sustainable brands (Fernandes & Saraiva, 2022). The concept of sustainable food consumption is multidimensional and commonly involves the practice of some sort of socio-political issue, such as animal rights, environment, or working conditions (Verain et al., 2021). As a result of the increased interest in sustainability, food activism has taken a central part in public discussion, which challenges the way people produce, distribute, and consume food (Price, 2021). Haider et al.'s (2022) research listed several key food consumption behaviors on an individual level that explains why consumers buy or avoid food-related products. Some of these include green consumption, ethical consumption, and anti-consumption. While each type of behavior has tried to reduce or refine a current consumption pattern through different means, all behaviors stem from a similar mindful sustainability mindset. Thus, the authors' findings suggest that marketers do not have to aim their efforts at specific targets since the mindful mindset can be seen as a homogenous audience.



Furthermore, the sustainability movement has not gone unnoticed by inauthentic corporations that have capitalized on narratives about sustainability, responsibility, and other social issues to gain a competitive advantage (Swenson & Olsen, 2018). These motives are often in opposition to producers in the craft category who distance themselves from mainstream brands that use mass-production, automatization, and offshore manufacturing to produce a similar product. Craft food is yet to have a homogenous definition. Thus, our paper will use Rivaroli et al.'s (2021) definition when referring to craft food: “...*genuine foods reflecting the connectedness with craftsmen's skills and local culinary traditions...*” (p. 12). While the size of the company does not necessarily have to affect the craft status, consumers perceive craftsmanship to be characterized by small-scale production which allows the artisan to create a better product (Rivaroli et al., 2020). For craft businesses to stay competitive, craft businesses must distance themselves from big cooperations and educate their audiences on their price premium which allows for increased quality of the product and better working conditions for employees (Cadby et al., 2021; Rivaroli et al., 2020).

#### **2.1.5. Brand Activists' Communication**

Marketing communications is a vital part of developing a brand since it is the process in how products and companies become brands. The communication of a brand builds associations with which consumers identify, understand, assign affection, recognize, develop relationships, and become attached to a brand. When resources are restricted and advertising is not an option as for many small businesses, the brand values need to be closely related to the functional and user experience of the product (Fill & Turnbull, 2019). The internet has offered many new opportunities for small businesses to market themselves (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014), which Fill and Turnbull (2019) saw as an important factor for companies with limited resources to communicate their brand.

Brands communicate plenty of information in various forms and on various social networking sites such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. The significant transformation in the way brands are managed online has the potential to affect consumer behavior and brand preferences (Marmat, 2021). This is of certain importance to small businesses that adopt brand activism since brand activism is about the creation of social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Schmidt et al. (2021) emphasized the increase of brands involved in socio-political issues to create value for communication purposes. Consequently, consumers become more aware of how their spending is ruled by political agreement (Simon, 2011). While research is divided on

the form brand activism takes, the common denominator suggests that it should involve some type of action (Hong & Li, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021; Wowak et al., 2022).

Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as a communicational strategy used to influence consumer behavior and highlighted four discernible traits through which activist brands communicate. The first trait underlined that their communication has a symbolic and intangible connection to brand values rather than linked to products and services. The second trait claimed that brand activism is based on values and problems and is not restrained by the need to be coupled with any political parties. The third trait expressed that while activist brands are viewed to communicate with local audiences, the motive for brand activism is often aimed at the larger public. The last trait suggested that brand activists adopt tools and techniques that respond well to the digital generation. Each campaign is planned and calculated to minimize the risk to become labelled as inauthentic.

## **2.2. Strategy as Practice**

Practice is the repetitive performance to attain habitual, recurrent, or routinized accomplishment of actions, or in other words, self-reinforcing learning (Jarzabkowski, 2004). Strategy as practice has arisen as an approach for the study of strategic management, strategic decision-making, strategy making, strategy work, and strategizing (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). It is a research topic that concerns the task of strategy as well as who execute it, what they execute, how they execute it, what they use, and what implications that has for the shaping of strategy (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Practice allows researchers to participate in a direct dialogue with practitioners and the study of practice enables one to examine issues that are relevant to people who deal with strategy. Thus, the theoretical understanding can be advanced in a way that has practical relevance for managers and organizations (Golsorkhi et al., 2015).

Strategy is not only just written in a strategic plan or relied on by top management decision making. Researchers within the field of strategy of practice have built upon major social theories to describe practice from various perspectives but mostly emphasized that practice is an activity performed by humans related to a strong social context. Previous research based on the Bourdieusian perspective on strategy as practice has studied how strategy develops and becomes established in individuals' and institutions' actions. This research explored how strategy as a practice links the relationship between the micro-levels of human activity and the macro levels of social and institutional context (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). Thus, this can partially

explain the link between small businesses' practices in their values in a socio-political context and the society in which the business operates.

Furthermore, Golsorkhi et al. (2015) presented that several authors has demanded a better link between the micro and macro levels of practices in strategy research. The Bourdieusian perspective is argued to be one of the opportunities to enlarge what is true or real in strategy as practice research. The perspective's focal point is the relation between two realizations of historical actions in bodies and things, in which the agent and the field interacts to solve the micro and macro conflict by treating the agents as social individuals. Thus, the perspective can explain the relation between a company on a micro level and the community on a macro level by taking previous actions into account and treating the company and community as social individuals. Moreover, the Bourdieusian perspective described the driver for practice as habitus, which is the system of dispositions for action that are socially constituted. It includes norms and ethics of perceptions, beliefs, and appreciations of what not to do or what to do and what is good or bad in relation to the probable future. It is a series of dispositions which is restructured and transformed through practice but also shapes practice in itself. Thus, the habitus is influenced by the environment the agent has faced and is facing (Golsorkhi et al., 2015).

In contrast to the Bourdieusian perspective, Jarzabkowski (2004) presented the theory of structuration developed by Giddens. Here, the interaction between agents and socially produced structures arises from repeated situated practices that form part of day-to-day routines. Structures are part of the collective systems that humans carry out their tasks in and both constrain and enable human action. These structures are also created and recreated by actors who are depending on social structures to act. Thus, the relationship between the agent and the structure enables social order which applies it in social institutions. The theory of structuration firstly explains that practice is established in social structures that persist throughout time. Secondly, it explains that institutional social structures are incorporated into the daily practices that constitute action. Lastly, it also explains that structures persist through the normative knowledge and practical consciousness of actors who choose recognizable patterns because of the ontological security it provides. Consequently, a company's values and beliefs can according to this theory be shaped by the structures and routines in a community, which the company in turn shapes.

### 2.3. Summary of Theoretical Framework

This study will build on the previous research on brand activism and its core sense. Vredenburg et al. (2020) defined brand activism as a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a company takes a non-neutral stance on contested socio-political issues. The authors presented the typology of brand activism and explain that a brand can either have an absence of brand activism, be a silent brand activist, be an inauthentic brand activist, or be an authentic brand activist. A brand pursuing a brand activism strategy will get the most out of brand activism if it proceeds with the latter.

Furthermore, Hydock et al. (2020) suggested that small brands might have more to gain than large brands when they are to pursue a brand activism strategy. The authors presented the *negativity bias* term, which explains that consumers have a negativity bias towards brands that do not align with their values. As a result, consumers will to a greater extent stop buying products from brands whom they have misaligned values with than buying from brands whom they have aligned values with. The reason why consumers choose to support certain brands can be explained through the self-congruity theory, which predicts how consumers behave by examine how they view themselves (Wijnands & Gill, 2020). Hydock et al. (2020) explained that small brands might offset the risk of misaligned consumers since they have more aligned non-consumers to gain in the market than misaligned consumers to lose. Although brands can offset the risk of misaligned consumers, Ulvenblad and Barth (2021) presented the *liability of smallness*, which explain that small businesses have limited resources that hinder them from making strategic maneuvers.

Consumers also distance themselves from food that is misaligned with their ideal self (Martinho, 2020). The rise of identity consumption has enabled consumers to define themselves through the food they choose to eat and drink (Ledin & Machin, 2020; Swenson & Olsen, 2018).

Communication has also been a researched area within brand activism. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as a communicational strategy used to influence consumer behavior and highlights four discernible traits through which activist brands communicate. The significant transformation in the way brands are managed online has the potential to affect consumer behavior and brand preferences, which is why social media is an important communication channel (Marmat, 2021).

Lastly, the concept of strategy as practice mostly emphasized that practice is an activity performed by humans related to a strong social context. Strategy as practice has arisen as an

approach for the study of strategic management, strategic decision-making, strategy making, strategy work, and strategizing. Research within this field can explain the relationship between companies on a micro level and society on a macro level by treating all agents as individuals (Golsorkhi et al., 2015).

## 3. Methodology

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*In this chapter, we start to present and argue for our inductive approach. We then continue to address the qualitative research design and strategy, which provided the framework for the study. Further, we present the data collection where we argue for our research sampling and our use of semi-structured interviewing. The data collection will then be followed by the data analysis, where we present the techniques used to code and interpret the data. Lastly, we discuss the limitations of the methods used, and which implications they had on the trustworthiness of our study.*

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### 3.1. Research Approach

The approach researchers take to develop theory can either be through theory-testing or theory-building. In research, this is adopted either through a deductive, inductive, or abductive approach. In a deductive approach, conclusions are derived from testing established theories on different premises. If the premises are true, so is the conclusion. In contrast, an inductive approach involves researchers to use a set of imperial observations to find patterns that can be used to create a theory (Saunders et al., 2019).

As the purpose of this study is to understand and explore the practices of brand activism within small businesses, we decided to take an inductive approach. We wanted the data to emerge from the perspective of the practitioner to thoroughly explore the practices. The approach also allowed us to use in-depth interviews as a data collection method. We deemed the interview method necessary to answer our research questions and to establish new insights to the brand activism phenomena. Brand activism is underrepresented in scientific research, especially in the context of small businesses. Therefore, there are few theories that exist that would allow for a deductive approach, which further strengthen our decision to take an inductive approach. An inductive approach still allows us to use relevant theory. It allows meaning to emerge from data without the restriction of current theory (Saunders et al., 2019).

### 3.2. Research Design and Strategy

According to Bell et al. (2019), the research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data and reflects decisions about what range of dimensions should be prioritized in the research process. Therefore, it is important to choose a design that aligns well with the

research purpose. Since the purpose emphasize understanding, the research design was chosen to be exploratory. Thus, we can achieve an in-depth investigation of the complex practices of brand activism in small businesses by exploration. The investigation will fulfil the purpose of this study, to explore how small businesses practice brand activism.

When researchers conduct a scientific study, they can choose between a quantitative or qualitative research method (Denscombe, 2018). A quantitative research method involves the collection, process, and analysis of numerical data. Quantitative studies are determined when researchers want to deal with unchanged data and details through structural instruments. The types of analytical instruments that are used in these studies can range from simple tables or graphs to complex statistical relationships between variables (Bell et al., 2019). In contrast, the aim of the qualitative research method aims to collect and analyze non-numerical data to understand a concept, experience, or phenomena that numbers cannot express.

To explore the practice of brand activism in small businesses, a qualitative research method was chosen as it enabled an in-depth understanding of the participant's experience and attitude towards brand activism. Qualitative research is preferred when the data is expected to be rich in contextual details which enable researchers to develop interpretive meanings about complex concepts (Bell et al., 2019). As there is a lack of information about small businesses' approach to brand activism, qualitative research was best suited to fill the research gap.

As qualitative research can take different forms of research designs, we chose to do a multiple case study. Bell et al. (2019) describe that the case study usually is a method that focuses on one organization, location, person, or event, but can also be structured with multiple cases. These are conducted to explore a general phenomenon which is not possible to explain with only one case. Since the purpose of this study was to understand and explore brand activism practices within small businesses, we considered that the study would need selected cases of small brand activist businesses to be able to learn from them and add to the literature. Bell et al. (2019) continue and explain that even though a case study is not limited to a qualitative method, it is true that the case study is favorable for qualitative methods since it concerns the complexity and nature of a particular situation.

Furthermore, case studies are distinguished from other research designs by a bounded situation or system. The case is the object of interest, and the researchers provide an in-depth interpretation of it. If this distinction is not drawn, it is not possible to recognize the case study as a research design of its own, since practically any type of research can be constructed as a

case study (Bell et al., 2019). Thus, it was of high importance to create a research design that focused on allowing in-depth data to be collected within the cases. First, through the research sampling, we made sure to be selective with what brand we included in the case study. Second, we developed a thorough interview guide for the semi-structured interviews which ensured in-depth insight into each case.

Another reason we conducted a multiple case study was the question of validity and generalizability in case study research. Critics of case studies have argued that a single case cannot represent findings applicable to other cases (Bell et al., (2019)). We reason that a multiple case study minimizes this risk by the contribution of several cases which then can form a more correct perspective of the reality. However, Bell et al. (2019) explain that researchers also emphasize the interest in details of a single case. The strength of a case study is the development of generalizable concepts and the production of meaning to abstract propositions. Once done, the case study can be applied to other circumstances. Another strength of the case study can be particularization, where the details of the case itself can provide insight into other circumstances. Furthermore, in-depth cases provide the basis for concrete context-dependent knowledge, which social science reliably produces. The idea that it is not possible to generalize from a single case is a common misconception about case study research (Bell et al., 2019). Even though these are reasons to conduct a single case study, we see that these are reasons to also conduct a multiple case study and thus, contribute with both generalized and particular information in both theory and practice.

### **3.3. Data Collection**

The research sampling, interviews and the interview guide will in this sub-chapter be presented. The research sampling assesses which principles have guided us in the selection of the different cases. The interviews explain the structures and how we proceeded with the interviews. Lastly, the interview guide describes how and with which type of questions we conducted the interview.

#### **3.3.1. Research Sampling**

There are several principles that guide the sampling process. To conduct a study, researchers can choose between probability or nonprobability sampling (Bell et al., 2019). In probability sampling, researchers aim to generalize a large population by collecting data from a selective sample (Saunders et al., 2019). There is a random element to this method since all targets have an equal chance to be selected from the population (Taherdoost, 2016). This type of sampling



is commonly associated with survey style data methods. When researchers select a probability sample, a suitable sampling frame must first be identified. It is the frame researchers use to select a sample from the targeted population (Saunders et al., 2019). While probability sampling can be used to reduce bias and add credibility to the research, the time and energy that is spent to conduct this type of study is often high (Taherdoost, 2016).

In contrast to probability sampling, non-probability sampling allows researchers to choose what population to specifically target (Bell et al., 2019). Non-probability sampling is an umbrella term that concerns all strategies not covered by the probability method (Saunders et al., 2019). This type of method is characterized by smaller samples but is used to seek in-depth understandings of a phenomenon (Taherdoost, 2016). As non-probability sampling lacks the random sampling element included in probability sampling, there is often a subjectivity involved which should be considered by the researchers (Bell et al., 2019). Due to the limited number of small businesses that use brand activism and the timeframe the paper was operated in, we chose non-probability sampling to gather the data quicker. The method allows us to deliberately sample specific businesses to make sure the data is rich enough.

Within non-probability sampling, several methods can be used. We selected a purposive sampling method, in which researchers select their target according to certain criteria (Taherdoost, 2016). This allows researchers to systematically determine what target to include or exclude. The criteria are often driven by the research question and can take multiple shapes (Saunders et al., 2019). We used a homogeneous method, which focuses on a particular subgroup in which all sample members are similar. In this paper the characteristics of the sampling used the following requirements:

1. The brand had to be involved in some type of brand activism
2. The brand had to be considered a small business
3. The brand had to be active in the craft food industry

The first and second characteristics of the sampling requirements were derived from the research gap. To define the second characteristic, we also used the European definition of a small business. The reason to limit the study to businesses in the craft food industry developed naturally, as early targets had the craft category as a common denominator. Furthermore, brands in the craft food categories tend to be active in questions surrounding sustainability, fair trade, and ecological farming, which are concepts that are closely related to brand activism. Thus, the

focus provided practical relevancy to craft brands that intend to become more socio-politically active. The choice to limit the sampling was also made to avoid becoming too general. This approach enabled us to find new relationships and patterns that had not been covered by previous research.

The initial sampling strategy to find targets relied heavily on keywords on Google as well as hashtags on Instagram (see Table 1). The search on Google used keywords directly linked to the research question to optimize the search results. The search on Instagram used keywords related to several socio-political movements characterized by polarized engagement by individuals and businesses. The Google results rarely provided direct links to businesses that were brand activists. However, it provided news articles and social media posts that we then used to find businesses. The Instagram results provided more connections to businesses since Instagram is a common channel for brands' communication.

**Table 1**

*List of keywords and hashtags selected for the study*

<b>Related to the research question</b>	<b>Related to the socio-political movements</b>
<b>Last date searched 2022-04-22</b>	<b>Last date searched 2022-04-22</b>
Artisan Activist	Black Lives Matter
Conservative small business	Earth Day
Craft Brewery Activist	LGBTQ
Activist Food Brands	One Percent for the Planet
Liberal Small Business	Pro (anti) Biden
Prosocial Consumption Business	Pro (anti) Gun
Purpose driven Small Business	Pro (anti) Trump
Small Activist Brands	Pro Abortion
Socio-political Small Businesses	Pro Life
Specialty Coffee Activist	We the people
Woke Local Business	

Another sampling strategy we used to find targets was to browse through the Instagram accounts of big multinational companies engaging in brand activism, such as *Patagonia* and *Ben & Jerry's*. We started to browse the posts of these companies but found no direct results. Therefore, we continued to browse through the accounts that the company followed. It turned out that a lot of the following of the big companies were both personal-, non-governmental activists, as well as other companies engaging in brand activism. We then entered the Instagram

account of each smaller business and assessed whether they met the characteristics of the sampling strategy or not.

Next, when a potential brand was found the selection process consisted of two steps. First, we identified what type of product the business offered and what type of activism the business practiced. Second, we ranked the businesses' socio-political engagement in their various social media platforms. The ranking was done through a scale from low to high engagement, to decide whether an interview would provide enough rich data for the research. Low visibility meant that brands posted socio-political engagement during yearly events such as women's day, elections, and pride month. Medium visibility meant that brands posted socio-political engagement during yearly events in addition to posting several socio-political issues spread out on their social media. High visibility meant that the majority of the brands' social media posts, webpage content, and products related to activist practices. We then emailed a request for participation to the brands that were considered to provide enough rich data. In total, 15 businesses were selected and contacted. Five of them agreed to participate in the study (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Summary of brand information*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Company Age</b>	<b>Socio-Political issues</b>	<b>Visibility</b>	<b>Place</b>
Brewery A	Craft Beer	7	Environmental, Social and Political	High	USA
Brewery B	Craft Beer	6	Create Socio-Political discussion	High	New Zealand
Brewery C	Craft Beer	2	Change drinking culture	Medium	Australia
Coffee Producer	Craft Coffee	2	Change the industry	Medium	Sweden
Food Supplier	Wholesaler of craft food	4	Change the supply chain	Low	Sweden

A snowball selection was also used to complement the purposive sampling process. A snowball selection is an effective technique in small research projects (Denscombe, 2018), such as our study. One benefit is that the growth of targets is quicker when one person suggests another target. The researcher can also develop better relationships with the participants, which allows

for better trustworthiness. Snowball selection is especially useful when there is no selection frame the researcher can use to identify and contact participants (Denscombe, 2018), or as in this study, only a few companies responded to our requests. For that reason, this approach is used in small and qualitative studies (Denscombe, 2018), which justifies the choice in our study.

Therefore, we asked the first interviewee if there were any other small businesses that came to mind that were brand activists to find new participants who could contribute with more insights. The interviewee mentioned an organization called the *1% For the Planet*, which businesses can be part of. Companies that are members of this organization donate 1% of their sales back to the environment as well as often take a stance on socio-political issues. During this process, we found three companies which we contacted. Although Denscombe (2018) suggest this is an effective way to grow the selection simultaneously with the research, only one agreed to participate in the study.

With only one target found with snowball selection, we chose to post on LinkedIn with the hope that someone in our network would have a connection with a brand activist company. We ended up finding one target which we found was relevant to our purpose and research questions. An interview was then scheduled. Bell et al. (2019) describe this sampling technique as opportunistic sampling, where we capitalize on opportunities to collect data from certain individuals who are unanticipated but still provide data relevant to the research question.

### **3.3.2. Interviews**

We chose to conduct data with interviews which is a common data collection method in qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019). We reasoned that it would be appropriate to use interviews since the study is small and we want to discover practices within small businesses, which can be phenomena that Denscombe (2018) suggest are complex and subtle. Key persons in the field can give valuable insight into such phenomena since they often possess privileged information. Denscombe (2018) argues that interviews suit well when researchers want to understand opinions, comprehensions, feelings, and experiences. This study can leverage from such insights, opinions, and experiences since we try to explain practices deeply connected to socio-political issues in small businesses. We argue that the socio-political issues of small businesses can be rather complex and difficult to understand.

In accordance with the favorable conditions for a case study, all interviews conducted in this study were constructed as semi-structured interviews. Bell et al. (2019) suggest that it is favorable to use qualitative methods in an intensive examination of a case study. Since the

purpose of this study is to explore the practices, what the result of these practices are, and find what role communication plays in brand activism within small businesses, emphasis was put on letting the interviewees develop their thoughts. A semi-structured interview is a type of interview where the researcher has prepared an interview guide and questions to discover more about a topic (see Appendix I). This type of interview allows us to be flexible in the topics' order and lets the interviewee develop ideas and thoughts, as well as speak more detailed about the topics we present. The answers are open and the focus is on the interviewees who develops their thoughts (Denscombe, 2018). Therefore, semi-structured interviews contribute to a more developed view of the case itself, which can explain brand activism in small businesses better (Bell et al., 2019).

After finding one small business willing to partake in an interview, we decided to conduct a pilot interview. According to Denscombe (2018), pilot studies are usually conducted to control how the method works, which was one reason why we took this approach. We did not know in advance how well our approach would work. Thus, a pilot study could assist the interview process with necessary improvements (Denscombe, 2018). We found that the interview process was successful and that no changes were necessary. Another reason why we decided to do a pilot study was the lack of participants. The process was slow in the beginning and we needed to start the research with a pilot interview. The first interview contributed with many valuable insights, which provided a good foundation for further interviews.

All interviews were separately conducted through Zoom Communications as a personal interview with either an owner or an employee of a small business that was engaged in brand activism (see Table 3). Since many of the companies that took part were located in other countries, the interviews had to be conducted online. There are certain risks associated with conducting an interview online. First, there can be potential technological problems with computer-based interviews. Wi-Fi connections can be inadequate, and people can be more or less familiar with tools such as Zoom Communications. Communication services like Zoom itself can also be susceptible to fluctuations in the quality of the connection which can make the interview less smooth. Therefore, recording of the interview can become imperfect, which makes transcription difficult (Bell et al., 2019). This was the case in some interviews, where the connection disappeared. Some valuable data might have been lost, but we asked the interviewee to repeat the answer. Even though it can be useful for the interviewee and interviewer to see each other, responses can also be affected by the interviewers' visible

characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity (Bell et al., 2019). We did however not find any trouble regarding this.

However, interviews conducted via online communication tools can also have some advantages. Interviews through for example Zoom Communications are more flexible than face-to-face interviews. Last-minute interviews might be easier to schedule (Bell et al., 2019), which was of advantage in this study. Furthermore, Bell et al. (2019) suggest that online interviews allow for savings in both cost and time since the need for travel is removed. Thus, we found it easier to convince people to participate, since it was more convenient for both us and them. Without online interviews, four out of five interviews in this study could not be possible because of significant geographical barriers, which Bell et al. (2019) present as a common obstacle.

**Table 3**

*Summary of the interviewed participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Location</b>
Brewery A	Owner	Male	2022-04-21	70:09	Zoom
Brewery B	Owner	Male	2022-05-03	70:55	Zoom
Brewery C	Marketing Director	Male	2022-05-05	67:55	Zoom
Coffee Producer	Co-founder	Male	2022-05-11	52:32	Zoom
Food Supplier	Owner	Male	2022-05-09	58:18	Zoom

In addition to the interviews, we contacted Brewery C by email with a complementary questionnaire that consisted of eight questions (see Appendix II). The goal with the questions were to allow the interviewee to further develop some concepts and practices. All questions were based on previous statements by the interviewee and were only used to complement certain answers.

### **3.3.3. Interview Guide**

Since the interviews were semi-structured, we developed an interview guide that allowed for flexibility and focused on the interviewee's thoughts. The interview guide consisted of 26 questions and nine sub-questions, which focused on practices, communication, consumers, company size, and brand identity (see Appendix I). The questions were carefully evaluated to provide answers to the research questions. Bell et al. (2019) suggest that the questions need to cover the areas we need to know about but from the interviewee's perspective. Therefore, we

further developed the questions to include words such as “*you*” or “*your company*” to get specific insights into the situation of the interviewees.

Although we followed the guide as much as possible, the interviewees sometimes answered two or more questions within one question. Therefore, some questions were skipped during the interview. Furthermore, sometimes the interviewee’s started talking about things we had not anticipated, which led us to spontaneously ask more questions about areas not included in the interview guide. Bell et al. (2019) explain that this is common in semi-structured interviews, as questions that are not included in the guide may be asked when the interviewees develop their thoughts.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

All the interviews were recorded on Zoom Communications and later transcribed. Bell et al. (2019) state that in qualitative research it is of interest to know both what people say and how they say it. Therefore, we recorded both audio and video, which Zoom Communications allows. All participants signed a consent document which permitted us to use the data in accordance with the Swedish Data Protection Act as well as Kristianstad University’s guidelines. All the data was then transcribed into 61 pages. Bell et al. (2019) describe transcription as a time-consuming activity. Therefore, the audio files were played in a slower tempo, which allowed for more efficient transcribing. Even though the transcription is time-consuming, Denscombe (2018) states that it is also a central part for the researcher to become familiar with the data. We also decided to exclude filler words or pauses in our transcriptions to make it easier for us to later code the data.

A problem with qualitative research is that it generates a lot of data comprised of unstructured language such as interview transcripts. Therefore, it is important for a researcher to not become too captivated by the richness of the data (Bell et al., 2019). To avoid captivation and enable better analysis and interpretations, the data were systematically coded. We chose to conduct a thematic analysis, which Bell et al. (2019) identify as a search for themes that are relevant to the research questions. Furthermore, Rennstam & Wästerfors (2015) describe it as a thematic sorting that originates in recurring content. Thus, we coded the data according to themes that arose from the interviewees’ thoughts and ideas but still made sure it was relevant to our purpose and research questions. After we had become familiar with the data, we started the coding process. The data were coded with colors, where different colors represented different themes that emerged in the transcriptions.

A thematic analysis can be conducted both in a deductive and an inductive way. The first stage of the coding process started in a deductive way, where codes are decided by existing concepts or ideas (University of Auckland, 2022). We coded the data in accordance with the topics developed in the interview guide. Therefore, the data was coded and split up into *Practices*, *Communication*, *Brand Identity*, and *Company Size*. The different codes were then separated into different documents to allow for further coding, which enabled us to go through the data in a more structured way.

The second stage of the coding continued in an inductive way, where codes and themes were decided by the content of the data (University of Auckland, 2022). Since the purpose is to understand and explore practices of brand activism within small businesses that have not previously been researched, we allowed the data to decide the themes. Consequently, the interviewees' thoughts and ideas formed the themes in this step. This is congruent with our inductive approach, where we aim on finding new insights that are based on the knowledge from practitioners and not based on previous research. In this stage we developed the following themes: *Co-creation and Community*, *Hiring Practices*, *Relatable Communication*, *Risk Management*, *Transparency*, and *Agility*. These themes were connected to the first codes they emerged from but could also be connected to additional sub-themes. The purpose of these themes was to identify what the practices looked like in the selected targets and explain what role communication has.

### **3.5. Trustworthiness**

To evaluate the degree of trustworthiness in business and managerial research, Bell et al. (2019) suggest to use four criteria: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*. *Credibility* measures the truth of the findings and is considered to be significant to determine the trustworthiness of a study. According to Connelly (2016), several techniques establish *credibility*. Some of these are prolonged engagement with participants, standard procedures, and peer debriefing. To add *credibility* to our work, the interviews were always scheduled with an extra half hour to the planned interview to ensure the respondents had enough time to develop their answers. Furthermore, we never cut an interview until the interviewee felt that they had said enough. To ensure standard procedures were followed, literature and supervision aided us throughout the research. Lastly, all steps in the thematic analysis and coding were conducted with a peer to minimize personal bias.



*Transferability* is the degree in which the findings can be used in other contexts (Connelly, 2016). To ensure our findings were *transferable*, we ensured a description of how the participants were found and selected as well as of their context and how the study was carried out. *Dependability* measures the possibility to recreate the same findings and achieve the same outcome repeatedly (Bell et al., 2019). To add *dependability* to our research, we thoroughly developed the sampling process, the interview guide, and the coding process. We also kept recordings and transcripts accessible to ensure *dependability*. *Confirmability* is explained as the neutrality of the findings (Connelly, 2016). To avoid personal bias we included detailed notes of our research process, took part in peer debriefing sessions, and again coded all data among two peers.

### **3.6. Limitations**

Despite the efforts to ensure the data's trustworthiness, there are some limitations to our findings. First, three of the participants were the brands' owners. While all owners were found to have a good overview of their respective companies, their relationship with the companies could have affected the credibility of the findings. Social desirability bias is the tendency to answer what is more socially acceptable instead of the true answer and often happens during sensitive topics (Bell et al., 2019). We argue that the authenticity aspect of our questions could have prompted this bias. Owners could have an incentive to exaggerate certain parts or practices of the business to present a favorable view of their brand. Thus, the interviews could have been effected in accordance with the bias, which could have been avoided if we would have chosen to interview employees in addition to the owners. Two of the remaining participants were employees of their respective companies. While the participants were able to answer each of our questions, their answers were sometimes found to be limited by their task at the company. Second, the data used five participants to explore the practices of brand activism in small businesses. The small sampling size made it hard to find patterns and determine if the outcomes of particular findings were credible. Furthermore, by limiting our sampling size to three industries the transferability and the degree to which data can be generalized or applied in different contexts was restricted.

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## 4. Findings and Analysis

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*In this chapter, we will present our findings from the interviews in both text and frameworks. The findings will also be analyzed in regard to the theoretical framework, other emerged topics, and our purpose, to form the basis for the discussion that follows. The chapter is divided according to the different themes found in the interviewees' thoughts and ideas and discover the different practices in relation to these themes. The chapter follows a sequence of the following: Co-creation and Community, Hiring Practices, Relatable Communication, Risk Management, Transparency, and Agility.*

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**Table 4**

*The sub-themes summarized.*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Example of Practice</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Co-Creation and Community</b>	Invite companies, non-profits, consumers, and employees from the community to create new issues	Explain the practices of small businesses' brand activism
<b>Hiring Practices</b>	Hire in accordance to the stance taken in a socio-political issue to align employees values with the company's values	Explain the practices of small businesses' brand activism
<b>Relatable Communication</b>	Use the fun-factor to relate the socio-political issue to the consumers	Explain what role communication has
<b>Risk Management</b>	Manage the internal and external risk to maintain profitability	Explain the practices of small businesses' brand activism
<b>Transparency</b>	Develop a transparency framework to ensure transparency of brand values and stance in social issues to the stakeholders	Explain what role communication has
<b>Agility</b>	Adopt a flat organization to ensure agility, which often is the case of small businesses engaged in socio-political issues	Explain the practices of small businesses' brand activism

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### 4.1. Co-Creation and Community

Co-creation was found to be especially important for small businesses engaging in socio-political issues. The practice of the actual issue the brand engaged in could both be formed by

and practiced with different stakeholders. The interviewed companies found themselves to affect an issue to a greater extent if they did it together with others. One brand stated that they do not need to get bigger to achieve change, but rather they just need to invite more people into their “*tent*” and get them to engage in a similar way. In that way, they could affect more people and get a broader range. Marketing research has shown that consumers increasingly move from a passive to an active position within co-creation. Therefore, the initial company-centric approach has also changed to a more customer-centric approach, where brands encourage stakeholders to be part of the co-creation experience (Tajvidi et al., 2020). Brewery A presented one example of this: “*We identify a non-profit that is doing work in a space that we believe is important and we will invite them into the taproom as a beneficiary and a portion of sales that evening will go back to that non-profit.*” Thus, the company can achieve change by actively incorporating external stakeholders into their business practices and at the same time creating sales both for themselves and the non-profit. Not only do small brands that engage in a socio-political issue co-create practices with other businesses and non-profits, but also with customers. Brewery A also mentioned:

*We learn from our customers. They are not shy about telling us what they need and what they are passionate about. So you know, if we have a customer base that is passionate about a specific cause, whether that is [...] we have supported things of all shapes and sizes.*

Therefore, customers can be part of the cause and feel a closer connection to the company, which Brewery A also has perceived: “*When people really believe why you do what you are doing instead of just what you do, they are more likely to be a customer for life and that is what we are trying to build.*” Thus, to engage in issues that are important to the customers and to cooperate with them, a small business can achieve recurring customers that purchase their goods repeatedly. It does not mean to divulge from their original issue, but rather to find more issues aligned with the company values to further strengthen the company’s brand.

The local community in which the company operates was also found to be important for their practices within co-creation. The Coffee Producer explained that in all countries they have coffee farms in, they try to engage the local community as much as possible. They explained that to be able to change the industry, they need to adapt the practices to the country’s needs. For example, in Uganda where the living standard is low, the focus must be to make sure the

farmers get a higher pay grade. Therefore, the Coffee Producer has started a project that incorporates a collaboration with a local coffee cooperative:

*...our main focus is on [...] building a centralized processing facility, like a washing station, where we can collect fresh coffee-cherry deliveries daily from these producers. [We can then] process that into a superior quality of coffee that we can fetch a higher price for and then we can sort of make sure that the farmer gets a better pay.*

However, in Brazil, where the living standard is better and the efficiency is high, the problem is rather on the environment. The Coffee Producer explained that the industry in Brazil is so efficient that it is heavily dependent on agro-toxins, which creates depletion of soil. Therefore, the focus must be to make sure to combat climate change: *"...with that knowledge we know that we tailor our efforts more towards how [to] make farmers more resilient on their farms so that they are better adapted for the future of global warming..."* Thus, just like Brewery A, the local environment and the social issues around it highly guides the Coffee Producer's practices of their brand activism.

Nevertheless, if we compare Brewery A's community with the communities of the Coffee Producer, we can see a big difference between the two. Brewery A's community is mainly spread around Southern California, USA, where the company was founded. The Coffee Producer's communities are spread all over the world, in all countries they have business in. Thus, the values and the issues of Brewery A are born from and a result of one local community, while the values and the issue of the Coffee Producer are born from and a result of several international, but still local, communities. The Coffee Producer has managed to take the values and social issue they engage in to several communities, all behind the same cause, but practiced in different ways. Since the issue and practices of both Brewery A and the Coffee Producer are both born of and are a result of the community that surrounds them, it can be argued that it is similar to the perspective on strategy as practice that the theory of structuration presented (Jarzabkowski, 2004).

Even if the other three companies did not have the same strong connection to the community as Brewery A and the Coffee Producer, we still found practices that linked back to the community. One of Brewery C's four core values is *Shout the First Round*. It meant that they go out of their way to do what is right for their team, their community, and their environment, even when it is hard or there is no one around to see it. Therefore, Brewery C is also rooted in

the community as it acknowledges the community as an important part of its practices. Since they go out of their way to do what is right for the community, it can be argued that their practices are coherent with the Bourdieusian perspective of strategy as practice (Golsorkhi et al., 2015), since their practices are a result of what they *should* do and what is good in *relation* to the probable future.

However, in contrast to the other companies, Brewery B explained that they did not necessarily take inspiration from the community for new issues: “...*people come up with me an idea because we've done over 500 beers, and [everyone] who meets me is like, you could do this, or you could do that. And I'm like, oh, that's cool.*” The interviewee thought that a lot of the ideas they got from the community were not coherent with the brand identity and explained that the community did not have the same feel for the brand as people within the company. Although they did not always listen to their community, some of their launched collections of beer concerned issues that only locals would understand. Thus, these collections were shaped by the community that the company is located in which also is created by the company with their social engagement. The perspective on strategy as practice that the theory of structuration presented (Jarzabkowski, 2004) is coherent with Brewery B’s practices. Therefore, they could still affect the community and create discussion around an issue locally.

The Food Supplier had not started to fully engage in brand activism yet, but still highlighted the importance of support. When questioned about how the company wants to change the food industry to the producers’ advantage, the reply followed: “*That [is] the plan we are building at the moment, but we need to generate support. We need to build some kind of movement behind us.*” This shows that the Food Supplier is also depending on others to succeed in their mission, which is coherent with the Bourdieusian perspective of strategy as practice, where the practices are influenced by the environment the agent is facing (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). Therefore, co-creation can be a necessity for small businesses to succeed in brand activism. The natural place to look for stakeholders to co-create values with lies in the community. Small brand activists can affect more together and stand up against issues they do not agree with. Brewery A stated: “*Like a school of fish that all swim together, they all get really big and menacing to ward off potential threats and that’s the same thing.*”

While consumers, other companies, and non-profit organizations often were found to be the initiators for many of the community-based issues the brands engage in, the employees had also an impact on the brands’ community engagement. In the research of Iglesias et al. (2018), the concept of employee co-creation was revealed to both drive employee satisfaction and

contribute to valuable consumer insights. New insights occur due to the employee's direct interaction and relationship with the consumer. The interviews revealed that several small businesses make conscious efforts to promote various employee initiatives to further strengthen their brand mission.

These employee initiatives have in many cases resulted in new community-based socio-political issues, as well as the implementation of new practices that strengthen the brand identity. This is coherent with the perspective on strategy as practice that the theory of structuration presented (Jarzabkowski, 2004). For Brewery A, their initiative has resulted in an employee-led *Diversity Inclusion Equity Committee* that meets quarterly to discuss various topics. The committee has contributed to several new events that widen the initial scope of the brand, with the "*focus on folks with different colors and races, or different [religions]*." The efforts of the committee have also encouraged the brand to be involved in more causes that benefit minorities, especially in environmental spaces. These new causes connect to the brand's initial mission to save the planet and strengthen the claim that the brand's mission has grown and evolved through its employees.

The Coffee Producer emphasized the importance to have local staff working on their coffee farms to enable engagement with the local community. The coffee industry is according to the interviewee rooted in an unfair system and mentioned: "*The whole industry is built upon colonial rules.*" Under these circumstances, it would be expected that the farmers felt a certain hesitation to start a collaboration with a new unknown brand that promise better working conditions. To be able to engage on a deeper level with the community and to avoid to be viewed "*...as the white guy telling them what to do...*", they decided to employ a foreman who both knew the community and its farming practices, which is coherent with the Bourdieusian perspective on strategy as practice. In the Bourdieusian perspective, the practices are a result of what they *should* do, and thus, the business decided to employ a foreman. Through co-creation, the employee was able to help the brand reach another perspective on local issues, most likely missed if they decided to minimize their employee engagement. The interviewee mentioned that their model also worked. As a result of employee co-creation, they grew from seven to 30 farms In El Salvador that wanted to engage with them in a year.

It was noted by Brewery C that their business is still young and as a result, many of the ideas are naturally employee generated. The idea of an ambassador program was initiated by an employee and developed into a tangible practice. The program identifies individuals, groups, and organizations the brand can develop a mutually beneficial relationship with. The first goal

of the program is to drive brand awareness and attract new audiences to try the product. The second goal is to maintain and deepen brand loyalty. The third goal is to support partners that resonate and align with the brand values. The last goal aims to establish new revenue streams and reduce costs. The selection process considered a range of factors such as cost, reach, alignment, positive social impact, and credibility, many of which is related to their brand identity. Thus, the practices of Brewery C are coherent with the perspective on strategy as practice that the theory of structuration presented (Jarzabkowski, 2004), since their practices are both formed by employees, that then create and form the employees with the mutually beneficial relationship.

## 4.2. Hiring practices

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of good *hiring practices* to be able to successfully approach a socio-political issue. The companies were also found to make certain efforts to develop and maintain strong employee relationships. The efforts directed toward the employees were found to be an answer to the risk associated with brand activism. The employees were found to help brands sustain the perceived authenticity and drive the brand mission forward. Organizational alignment–employee engagement literature emphasized the importance to maintain synergy between the brand and the employee to ensure homogenous movement towards the shared organizational goal (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015; Guan & Frenkel, 2020). We argue that brand-employee synergy is especially important for purpose-driven businesses as the practices are characterized by high risk and uncertainty.

During the interview with Brewery C, the interviewee mentioned: “...*people are drawn to work here because they see a connection with the vision and the values.*” Brewery C’s statement suggest that individuals apply for their job position because they share similar values as the company. Furthermore, the interviewee also mentioned that efforts are directed early on after the hiring to educate new staff members about the brand values and practices: “...*within the first two days of everyone signing, there's a values and purpose session with the founders and their manager to articulate these values and give examples of it.*” Vredenburg et al.’s (2020) authenticity research strengthened Brewery C’s choice of practice as the brand’s efforts to uphold certain values, even on an employee level, enabled brands to be perceived as authentic. The statements made by Brewery C also highlight that while mission-driven businesses attract like-minded individuals, they do not solely rely on good *hiring practices*. These businesses still need to have processes that educate all new staff members about brand values and beliefs. Brewery C also stated: “...*in bigger organizations it's really easy to hide...*” which implies that

everything is more exposed in small organizations. A mistake from one employee can have a direct impact on the brand.

While Brewery A did not mention whether they had a program in place to educate their employees, they recognized the responsibility their front house personnel have to their brand:

*We hire, particularly for our in front house positions people who have a certain, I always use the term optimistic warmth in our taprooms, who are open minded, kind people who are there to engage with the costumers and above all things beer and all things that we support.*

It was found that Brewery A employed individuals that align with certain characteristics of the brand to represent and uphold its mission because the owner cannot manage several taprooms at once. The interviewee further elaborated on the front house position and stated: *Anytime someone is buying [our brand of] beer they are most likely buying them, they are buying a piece of them, they are buying an interaction they just had with them.*” With *them*, the interviewee refers to the front house position, which subsequently is important for both the brand and the socio-political issues they engage in. It is hard to determine whether the interviewee referred to their selective *hiring practices* as an outcome of brand activism or not. According to Glanfield and Ackfeldt (2018), it is a common practice to hire individuals with outgoing and engaging traits within the hospitality industry due to the interactive nature of the work.

In contrast, the Coffee Producer responded that when they hire, they choose candidates purely on individual personality: *“...we need to work with people that are nice human beings and that you connect with and you share values and ideas...”* This suggests that several of the brands actively employ staff that are aligned with their values or educate early to assure that they reflect the brand identity. An effect of hiring individuals with shared goals that Brewery C mentioned was: *“...you're going to have people who care more about the messages you're putting out there and hold those messages much more personally than they would if they were working for a grey commercial organization”*. While the justification to choose personality over ability is common in the hospitality industry and not necessarily a criterion for brand activists, it does reveal the significant impact hiring has for socio-political businesses.

During the Black Lives Matter movement, Brewery A announced a supportive stance through different practices and mentioned that they among other things put up signs outside their taprooms. However, the interviewee also mentioned: *“It was just tense and a little scary for our staff at times but we always allowed our staff to each of our locations, to democratically choose*



*if they wanted to keep the signs up.*” When the employees got the choice, they all chose to keep the signs up. The case demonstrates the positive impact aligned employees can have on socio-politically engaged businesses. The business did not dilute its brand identity and instead generated authenticity for the brand. Brewery A was also open about paying more attention to their *hiring practices* as a result of their engagement in the Black Lives Matter movement. The decision resulted in a *Diversity Equity Inclusion Committee* that consists of the staff to widen their scope and source people in different places for job opportunities. Brewery A stated that they were yet to include quotas in their *hiring practices* because they still want the best individual for the job, but the effort was made to bring more diverse representation into the different spaces, which align with their stance on the socio-political issues they engage in.

### **4.3. Relatable Communication**

According to several interviewees, the issue that the brand engages in must be relatable to the consumers so that the consumers would understand and find the issue interesting. Consumers might find it difficult to consume the information a company communicate because of the increased amount of information new technology has provided (Hill, 2021). Therefore, companies must stand out from other companies in the noise of messages (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014). We found that all the companies are heavily dependent on communicating their values to their consumers to drive both sales and attention. Two of the companies interviewed described that they needed to make it fun for the consumers to be able to drive their socio-political goals.

When Brewery B communicate the multiple social issues they engage in, they do it in a creative and humorous way. Once they decide to raise an issue, they use satire to get the point across to consumers. Brewery B mentioned: *“We do a lot of satire and making fun of things that are stupid. And then also in that kind of fun, we can kind of bring attention to causes because we do it in a playful way.”* When asked about the goals of using satire as a way to engage in socio-political issues, Brewery B answered: *“Creating conversations, really. It's not that we want to influence anything per se, but really, it's like engaging about what people are talking about or what people should be talking about and kind of just creating discussion around it.”* Thus, the *relatable communication* is incredibly important for Brewery B’s socio-political goals. When consumers find the communication funny and relate to the company, the consumers are more likely to engage in the issues associated with the company, thereby achieving the company’s goal.

For example, during the covid-19 outbreak in New Zealand, Brewery B did a beer that made fun of people who believed in the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates wanted to microchip people with the covid-19 vaccines. It created attention because of the topical discussions that were going on in New Zealand with the vaccines and the satirical message which many people found funny. The Brewery were themselves pro-vaccination and described that the ones who did not vaccinate themselves were not their demographic. Because of the fun-factor, the message succeeded in creating a discussion around the pros and cons of vaccines. Thus, when they related a fun message with a serious topic people can have polarized views on, they can create discussion around socio-political issues they find important and takes a stance on.

Another issue that Brewery B engaged in was the war Russia had declared on Ukraine. The use of humor in their sarcastic messages on their social media and beer cans resulted in NZD 60.000 raised by the Brewery for the cause. An issue that is normally associated with seriousness was suddenly associated with humor: “...we could use the kind of humor to really make an impact.” The interviewee described that they had more power than they thought and that they could actually raise good money and do something good out of it.

A question that can challenge the view on *relatable communication* in this situation is if it would be possible to raise the same amount of money without using humor. The answer is probably yes. The interviewee mentions: “...I didn't think that supporting Ukraine was a political thing because it's just the right thing to do, because it's so obvious.” However, since humor and satire are closely connected to the brand identity of Brewery B, the money was raised in a brand-consistent way which according to Vredenburg et al. (2020) is important to be perceived as authentic. Furthermore, the right thing to do in this situation controls the company's practices, which is coherent with the Bourdieusian perspective on strategy as practice (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). Thus, Brewery B is both coherent with the Bourdieusian perspective on strategy as practice and the theory of structuration's perspective on strategy as practice.

The Coffee Producer also mentioned that it was crucial to use a fun-factor to make consumers relate to the issues they engage in. The interviewee meant that it needs to be an attractive and easy choice for the customer to buy their product. People choose to consume their products because they look good, they taste good, they are fun, and they do good. The Coffee Producer mentioned:

*What we wanted to do is really, like make something that sort of pops in lots of colors and make it fun. So it's appealing and attracting and [...] inviting. So people come in to our community and they can engage and see that. Okay, wow, this packaging is beautiful. And then you've already sort of made that first communication as a tool, and then they start reading on the packaging like, what is in this bag or what does it mean or everything that we represent? And then you just keep adding layers of layers of depth to it.*

Consequently, the issue itself is not something that is necessarily communicated to the company's consumers at the first sight. Instead, the company use the fun-factor to engage the consumers in the product, which then results in the consumers' increased awareness, alignment, and repeat purchases.

Brewery B also explained the process when they are to get the issues they engage in communicated and related to their consumers: *"We just come up with a beer and we put it out there, and then we put some stuff on social media, and then the discussion happens between people."* Although this seems like a simplified explanation of the process, the interviewee also explained that they do not complicate things too much. When they made hundreds of beers a week, there was only a limited amount of things that were plannable in advance. They planned what they were going to do this week to be able to communicate it next month. That allows for the issues to be still up to date, which makes it relevant to the public.

A connection was also found between the *relatable communication*, the company growth, and the engagement in the social or political issues. An increase in sales could be crucial for the company to continue their pursuit of the socio-political issues they engage in. The Coffee Producer mentioned:

*...if [...] we can make more of [our product], then we're making greater impact. So if we can sell more coffee here in Scandinavia, we can work with more producers in El Salvador, more producers in Uganda, and then that's really what makes this scalable, and that's really what makes this ongoing. Really. Like, we just need to stay true to our mission and then we sell, like, hell.*

Brewery C also mentioned the connection between growth and increased engagement in the social issue they engage in: *"We know that our growth equals success in our vision by selling more beer and changing more people's perspectives on drinking."* Thus, the Coffee Producer

and Brewery C make a clear connection between increased sales and increased engagement in their social issues.

Our findings highlight that the fun-factor could be used as a technique to increase brand awareness. Thus, it could also be argued that *relatable communication* in the shape of fun-factor can be crucial when small businesses are to increase their engagement in a socio-political issue. Small businesses must relate to the consumers to be able to increase sales. Increased sales can result in increased engagement in socio-political issues. Research has shown that brand awareness can be an important factor for a company to increase purchase decisions and repeat purchases from consumers. A higher brand awareness equals increased purchases. Companies can use several techniques to create brand recognition and brand recall (Ahmed et al., 2020). Thus, high *relatable communication* with a fun-factor can result in growth for the brand. Furthermore, the *relatable communication* needs to be in line with the company's mission and values and create an engagement for the consumer to be able to increase sales.

Even though it might be obvious that companies must make their product and values relatable to their consumers, it might not be so obvious to implement that relation. The findings of the fun-factor indicate that small businesses do not want to force any values, opinions, or issues on their consumers. They want to package their values in a creative way, which consumers find easier to accept. Thus, the company considers what is most appropriate according to their situation, which confirms that the Bourdieusian perspective on Strategy as Practice (Golsorkhi et al., 2015) could be applied to small businesses' practices within brand activism. The company incorporate the practices to be appropriate in a social sense, which Brewery B and the Coffee Producer do through the fun-factor. Therefore, the fun-factor is an efficient tool for small businesses when the focus is to translate serious issues to the wider public. However, we must address that the fun-factor was found in two of five cases in this study, which implied that a fun-factor would not necessarily work for all companies.

#### **4.4. Risk Management**

All the interviewees were aware of certain risks associated with their brand practices. Brewery A recognized the risk to get backlash from misaligned consumers and mentioned that the risk comes in waves. However, they mentioned that it was important to: “...*not be scared of...[the vocal] minority.*” Brewery B had a similar attitude to consumers and recognized that they cannot tailor their communication for everyone. When Brewery B got backlash for their pro-vaccination stance in one of their communicational efforts, they mentioned that the people who

gave them backlash “...*weren't really our demographic.*” Interestingly, the brands that were most vocal and acceptant about not appealing to the mass market were the older businesses in our sample. According to Vredenburg et al.’s (2020) typology of brand activism, Brewery A’s and B’s open commitment to socio-political practices could qualify them as authentic brand activists. By using the same typology, the remaining brands are identified as silent brand activists. Silent brand activist uses similar means to their socio-political practices but are not as vocal in their marketing messages as authentic brand activists. Therefore, silent activists have a decreased operating risk due to the lower chance to alienate their consumers. The stability of Brewery A’s and B’s business, along with their experience to run a socio-political brand, may explain why they have decided to become authentic brands and increase their risks.

Businesses need to balance the interest of their stakeholders to stay competitive. Brewery B mentioned that adaptability is key when a brand is to engage in socio-political issues. Brands need to listen to market research and adapt to consumer demand to stay competitive. Brewery B mentioned: “...*you can have all the morals you like, but if it's going to make you bankrupt, you're going to have those morals in front of people for a very short amount of time.*” The statement made by Brewery B relates to the liability of smallness that explain the limited access to resources and weaker financial structures small businesses have. Therefore, smaller businesses are more susceptible to market changes. Lima et al. (2020) found that small businesses do not have the same resources to manage their risk as large businesses. The authors suggested that small businesses are more vulnerable compared to larger businesses, especially when their brand strategy could result to alienate a part of the market. To minimize the risk, Brewery B suggested that the brand’s practices: “...*should [be] within your values and within your ethos, but still tends towards more of what consumers want.*” Brewery B’s statements imply that small brands should stay true to their values but also be flexible in how they approach different issues. The business needs to be profitable to be able to drive and sustain socio-political change.

The growth of a company can cause a brand to lose sight of its mission and identity and as a result, damage its authenticity. Brewery A stated that when you first start: “...*it's easy to lose sight of your why and why you do what you're doing cause you're so overwhelmed with the task of making...*” When a business is young the owner performs most of the tasks and the mission gets dismissed to focus on profitability. Brewery C expressed a similar concern that the business: “...*[became] too focused on the commercial side of things and not [focused] enough on the cultural change.*” However, the same business mentioned that they had incorporated

practices to manage the risk and balance both parts in their communicational efforts. One of these activities was a *Too Good To Be Wasted* campaign, which connected their product quality on the commercial side to their brand identity on their mission side. For Brewery B, their approach and practices consisted more of a hands-on approach and directly avoided distributors that wanted to limit their releases to four beers a year. The Food Supplier were similarly in the process of establishing a checklist to make sure they sourced from the suppliers that fit with their brand identity. It was partly difficult to understand what practices the brand performed to remind itself of the mission. None of the brands that participated was that old and had little experience with growth and how their efforts had affected the mission efforts in retrospect.

Another threat that was only mentioned by one interviewee was the operational and financial risks. To be able to perform their work, the Coffee Producer needed to operate in zones that many stakeholders considered high risk, such as Uganda or El Salvador. While these countries have an abundance of natural resources, they are often poor in infrastructure and have high poverty and corruption rates. The risks these countries present can have negative effects on business operations. To reduce the risks, the Coffee Producer required a: “...dependable relationship with our coffee communities because otherwise we're not going to see any improvements.” The Coffee Producer further mentioned that bigger commercial brands only build a transactional relationship with the farms, which the Coffee Producer view as problematic. The approach the Coffee Producer had decided to take presented additional risks and challenges in comparison to commercial brands, especially when their efforts: “...can never be on the cost [...] for the farmer.”

However, the Coffee Producer had incorporated several practices to manage the risk. We found that the community was an essential part of their work, but also a big part of their *risk management*. Their education program in their communities has enabled neighboring farms to improve their production both in terms of quantity and quality. According to Bianchi and Saleh (2020), Supplier-buyer trust can grant the buyer greater product quality, warranty, and knowledge exchange, which was the case for the Coffee Producer's consumers. The supplier improvements have enabled the Coffee Producer to improve their product capacity and increase the number of suppliers they can rely on during times of instability and bad harvests. Their model is also used as an experimental toolbox and applied in other communities, which reduces the risk when the brand establishes itself in a new country.

## 4.5. Transparency

The empirical data showed that *transparency* was a part of small brand activists' practices. The brands were found to be transparent towards their stakeholders, and in particular, their consumers, suppliers, and partners. Some brands found it necessary to be transparent since that was part of their business idea. Other companies found that the *transparency* came as a result of their operations, but still was necessary to incorporate in their business. The Food Supplier explained that if a supplier were not interested in *transparency*, it was not a suitable supplier. Therefore, the company took active steps to make sure *transparency* could be guaranteed and as a result also the authenticity which Vredenburg et al. (2020) highlighted as important. The interviewee mentioned: "...what we're doing now is that we are developing [a] transparency framework that we [are going] to work with [as] a set of criteria where [the] producer need to meet some form of score [that is] based on being transparent." Thus, *transparency* is in this situation a necessity because of the Food Supplier's business idea. Their identity and mission are based on being authentic. However, it was unclear exactly how the company developed the framework.

Companies that found the *transparency* as a result of their operations did not primarily focus on *transparency* but instead viewed it as a necessary step when they communicated with their consumers. The Coffee Producer mentioned: "...just believe in what you do and then do it better and better, and then [results are] going to show. And then it comes down to transparency and showing results in [...] actually making impact..." Thus, the Coffee Producer focuses on their core mission and issues, but also uses *transparency* in practice when they are to communicate their social results to their consumers. By using *transparency*, the company provides a bridge between its corporate practices and its activist marketing message, which helps the brand achieve authenticity that Vredenburg et al. (2020) found important. The interviewee continued to explain that they constantly assess how they can showcase what the farmers' livelihoods, environment, and conditions are like in the countries they have coffee farms in.

We also found that when small businesses are to be transparent with their consumers, it is important for them to be so in an honest way. The Coffee Producer told us how they managed to do so: "we've initiated a cooperation with a nonprofit organization that is going to help us verify our claims and staying true to what we like in talking transparency [...] [so] we have a third party observer that sort of verifies what we're saying is actually what's going on." Thus, this is a way to ensure authenticity of brand activism in the company. The Coffee Producer has not only both a high activist marketing message and prosocial corporate practices, but also a

tool that makes sure the connection is valid between the two. Since Vredenburg et al. (2020) stated that inauthenticity and false messages can result in consumer distrust, it is particularly important for small businesses to avoid inauthenticity. Consumer distrust can result in a decrease in sales, which suggests that small businesses cannot continue their engagement in their issue, as explained in *Relatable Communication*.

Even though the other companies did not specifically mention *transparency* as one of their practices, they still highlighted its importance. Brewery A stated: “...it’s really easy to post a black square on Instagram and stand in solidarity with things...” The interviewee referenced to the BLM movement, when a lot of people posted black pictures on their Instagram to stand up against racial injustice in the USA, but then continued:

*... but what are you actually doing to change your organization internally for the better? What are you doing to support that cause that spurred you to post that in the first place, is it financial, awareness, like what are you actually feeling? That is where the rubber meets the road on activism.*

Thus, the interviewee put the importance of incorporating prosocial corporate practices to be perceived as transparent and authentic. A consumer might agree with the values of a black square. But for the consumer to really understand the brand and for the brand to achieve authenticity in brand activism, the practice of *transparency* can be key.

#### **4.6. Agility**

One of the challenges small businesses face is to allocate the limited amount of resources available to them. When the interviewees were asked about whether the liability of smallness has slowed down their progress or not, we found that all businesses considered their size not to be a limiting factor. The interviewees rather considered their size to be an advantage to their brand activism practices, which was mentioned due to their *agility*. According to Thoumrunroje and Racela (2021), the concept of organizational *agility* refers to businesses’ capability to adapt to quick changes in the market environment. Furthermore, the capabilities can be conceptualized through multifaceted structures, strategies, or practices. The findings in our interviews confirm and build on Thoumrunroje and Racela’s (2021) research as the concept of organizational *agility* is also true in small businesses practicing brand activism.

When Brewery B reflected on the liability of smallness they mentioned: “...people that work for [big corporations] wish they could do the things that we do in some respect.” Upon further



reflection, the interviewee argued that small socio-political engaged businesses should not strive to replicate what bigger corporations do, but instead use the practice of sensing and seizing opportunities to “...*do things that other people wouldn't* “. Their numerous beer releases are such an example, but so is their move towards a digital sales channel. According to the interviewee, bigger breweries do not offer their product online because it would be a small percentage of what they do. But for Brewery B the online store was a huge opportunity for them to spread their socio-political messages and find new consumers. Brewery A and the Coffee Producer also mentioned that their digital channels have enabled them to reach new targets. According to Brewery A: “...*social media platforms are really limitless in what our reach can become if you know how to navigate them.*” They are constantly on the lookout to find new social media channels to increase their amount of socio-political engagement because: “...*different age groups take in information [differently] ...*” Their recent move to TikTok has enabled them to engage with a younger demographic they did not have before. Therefore, it can be argued that small brand activists create practices to be able to capitalize on their *agility* as small actors in the socio-political market.

Several of the participants mentioned the organizational structure as a key factor in their activism efforts. The Coffee Producer adopted a flat organization and emphasized the need to: “...*keep a high ceiling...*” within the organization to allow everyone to share opinions. The flat organization and shared opinions allowed the employees to perform more spontaneous activist practices. The practices of the Coffee Producer are similar to sense and seize opportunities (McKinsey & Company, 2017), which implies that the Coffee Producer benefits from their *agility*. Small brands should proactively use their *agility* to sense and seize upon changes in the external environment (McKinsey & Company, 2017). The practice to sense and seize has formed the structure of the Coffee Producer’s practices and enabled a setting where new insights could derive from both formal and informal voices. The sense and seize practices enabled the possibility for the Coffee Producer to affect more socio-political issues and drive engagement in relevant socio-political topics.

The Coffee Producer also mentioned that their *agility* has allowed the brand to easier collaborate with different organizations. Non-profit organizations that want to try out new sustainability projects viewed their business as a great potential because: “*if you want to implement something new [...] it's really difficult in a huge organization whereas our power [...] sort of lies in our flexibility and being agile.*” The Coffee Producer’s efforts to achieve their mission consisted of sensing and seizing opportunities to find the most efficient practices: “...*it's literally like you*

*throw things on the wall and [if something] sticks, we go that direction.*” This aligns with Rishipal’s (2014) research that suggested that flat organizations are characterized by increased work responsibilities, efficient coordination, and communication. Thus, the company has a tactical position that allows it to make direct changes in its business efforts. The company can leverage their size to sense and seize opportunities during affairs with stakeholders that want to see an immediate impact.

Brewery C decided to reduce the hierarchical structure to follow their mission of questioning normal and building each other up. The interviewee emphasized, similarly to the Coffee Producer, that there is no formula to their practices. The company’s business structure has allowed them to: “... *move really quickly. We can make relatively quick decisions in terms of how we get out there in front of as many people as possible.*” As their niche industry is relatively young, their flexibility has allowed them to capture as many market shares as possible. Brewery C mentioned that their efforts to take risks to capture more attention are important because of an implication: “...*potentially hundreds of competitors that are going to enter the market over the next couple of years.*” Their strategy suggests that they have tried to leverage their *agility* to figure out what resonates with consumers before larger businesses with more resources and consumer data enter the market.

## 5. Discussion

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*In this chapter, we will further discuss our empirical findings collected through the interviews of this multiple case study. The discussion will revolve around and be in relation to the previous research, our purpose, and our research questions.*

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### 5.1. The Concept of Co-Created Brand Activism Practices

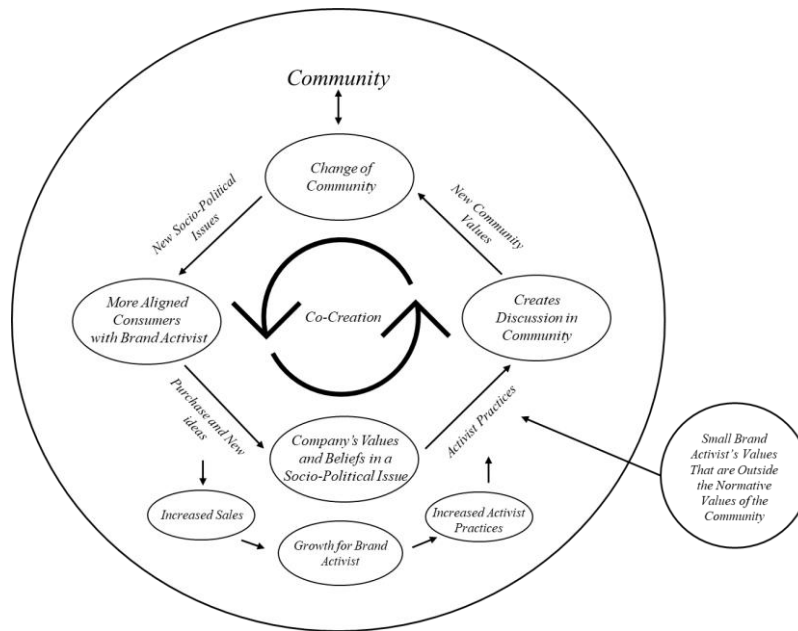
The first research question concern how the practices look like in small businesses that engage in brand activism. Research within co-creation has previously explained that brands encourage stakeholders to be part of the co-creation experience since brands increasingly take a customer-centric approach (Tajvidi et al., 2020). Our findings show that co-creation can be an important tool for small businesses that practice brand activism, which is something that has not been emphasized by previous authors. The previous literature regarding strategy as practice explained a company's actions in relation to the society it operates in (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). Jarzabkowski (2004) suggested that all companies affect the community in various ways. One thing that stood out in our empirical findings was how *co-creation* forms the conditions of growth for small, socio-political brands. We found that when a small brand is to engage in socio-political issues that concern the community, its activist practices simultaneously affect the community in which it operates.

The brand's activist practices of its values, mission, and stance it takes on socio-political issues form the community and its stakeholders' perspective on the social issues to a greater extent than if brand activism would be absent. The stakeholders within the community are affected by the activist practices through awareness and communication, such as a *fun-factor* or physical encounters with the brand such as events. Thus, the *relatable communication* theme and its brand activist practices are closely connected to the *co-creation and community* theme and its activist practices. The communicated message of the brand activist that revolves around the brand's values and opinions results in discussion around the brand's socio-political issue, which can form the ideas and values of the other individuals in the community. Thus, the brand activist's message has the probability to change the community's values in line with the brand's values.

The changed values within the community then favor the small brand activist since the community is now more aligned with the values of the small brand activist. Hydock et al. (2020) suggested that small brand activists have a large number of non-consumers with a high probability to align with the brand activists' values. Since the Theory of Structuration's perspective on strategy as practice explain that a company's values and beliefs are shaped by the structures and routines in society (Jarzabkowski, 2004), the company will be favored by the community's changed values and structures. The Bourdieusian perspective also confirms that the company will be favored as a result of the change in the community since the company is controlled by the situation it is prevalent in and what is right or wrong in relation to the future (Golsorkhi et al., 2015), or in this case the community's norms. The community in which a small brand activist operates will have established norms that state what is right and wrong.

Thus, the small brand activist must keep itself within the boundaries of these norms to fit in with the other stakeholders of the community. The activist practices of *co-creation* with the other stakeholders in the community around the company emphasize the arrows and connection between the different stakeholders and the company (see Figure 2). As a result of new values within the community that are in line with the small brand activist's values, consumers will to a greater extent be aligned with the brand and purchase the brand activist's products, which leads to growth for the company. Therefore, both the Bourdieusian perspective and the Theory of Structuration's perspective on strategy as practice are enhanced for small brand activists. The brand activist will gain more resources to pursue its mission because of the increased sales. The circle will then start over again but this time to a greater extent because of the increased size and resources of the small brand activist.

However, to be able to create social change and thus, change the norms of the community that the Bourdieusian perspective acknowledges (Golsorkhi et al., 2015), the brand activist must challenge the ideas of the community and step outside the normative boundaries. Brand activism also involves adopting a non-neutral stance on socio-political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and is thus the point of brand activism. The small brand activist will in its message challenge the norms of the community and will then risk to be perceived as rebellious and to lose misaligned consumers. However, since small businesses according to Hydock et al. (2020) can offset the risk to alienate consumers, the small brand activist can afford to go outside the normative boundaries to affect socio-political issues. This discussion is summarized in *The Concept of Co-Created Brand Activism Practices* presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2***The Concept of Co-Created Brand Activism Practices*

Hydock et al. (2020) presented that small brand activists could have a benefit over large brand activists because of the few existing consumers to lose and many potential consumers to gain. Our findings confirm that small brands can gain more consumers than they lose, but also adds that small brands can achieve even more consumers when they are clustered together. Small brand activists can together create more change in the socio-political issues they engage in because of their co-creation. The community was a crucial aspect for the small businesses when they engaged in an issue together with others. When more companies engage with the same stance on the same issue, the effect on the stakeholders in the community will be greater, thereby enhancing the company growth and the socio-political effects presented in *The Concept of Co-Created Brand Activism Practices*. The enhancement in growth and socio-political effect may motivate small brand activists to engage in a socio-political issue with other brands that have aligned values.

## 5.2. Benefit of Smallness

The study explored the means to be a small brand activist. The initial prediction, supported by Ulvenblad and Barth's (2021) research on the liability of smallness, suggested that a brand's small size would have a negative impact on its practices. In theory, the data would show a similar brand identity and mission to that of a bigger brand activist. However, the capabilities of the small brand activists would make the execution and the impact of their efforts less

effective. Ulvenblad and Barth's (2021) concept proposed that the lack of resources hinders the companies to make strategic maneuvers.

However, we argue that the restricted resources are precisely what allows small socio-political businesses to stay competitive. To our knowledge, few papers on the liability of smallness do not view the problem-solving elements that arise from limited resources as an asset, only a means to lessen the liability structures (Gimenez-Fernandez et al., 2020; Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021). Similar to Thourmrunroje and Racela (2021), we argue that organizational *agility* enables small businesses to create flexible and adaptable practices as well as sense opportunities. The size and dynamic nature of these brand activists have been found to establish an environment where employees are nurtured to use flexible and innovative solutions, which instead implies a *Benefit of Smallness*. The solution to overcome the constraints is not to replicate the activities of larger brands, or take fewer risks, but to use the circumstances as an asset to tailor their practices.

Our findings showed that small socio-political businesses do not have to spend a large number of resources to make an impact. For example, our findings build on Marmat's (2021) research that suggested that brands communicate plenty of information in various forms and on various social networking sites to affect consumer behavior and brand preferences. We add that small brand activists use social media as a free tool to drive their socio-political messages and reduce their monetary expenses on paid promotion. Their flexible and agile practices allowed them to directly approach various stakeholders and engage in more socio-political issues that are relevant to them and their consumers.

### 5.3. The Question of Communication

Furthermore, our findings showed that the practice of communication is a vital part when a small brand activist is to co-create practices with its stakeholders. The literature covered the role of communication within brand activism as a practice to connect to consumers. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as a communicational strategy used to influence consumer behavior. Our findings confirm Manfredi-Sánchez's (2019) view on communication by acknowledging that communication plays a vital part but adds that it is important when a small brand activist is to *relate* their socio-political engagement to their consumers. Moreover, a small brand activist must use and develop communicational strategies to be able to co-create socio-political issues or practices with other brands or non-governmental organizations. Small brand activists might have to use their limited resources wisely and be *transparent* to find ways

to connect with both consumers, partner brands, and non-governmental organizations. Thus, the strategies, frameworks, and ideas a small brand activist has around its communication all affect the *relation* it has to all its stakeholders, not only the consumers.

The *fun-factor* we found was especially important for two of the companies when they were to *relate* to their consumers. Complex socio-political issues can be argued to not always be understandable or seem to be interesting by individuals. Young consumers are interested in and to a higher degree demand brands to use their power to create socio-political change (Mirzaei et al., 2022). We add to this research and argue that other consumers might find it difficult to align with a brand activist because of the lack of interest in socio-political issues. It would not mean that the consumers would be misaligned and not agree with the brand, as Hydock et al. (2020) suggested, but rather that they think socio-political issues are “grey” and “boring”. Communication humor research has focused on specific types of humor that have produced communicative functions (Lynch, 2002). The practice of humor in what we term the *fun-factor* can aid small brand activists to gain these consumers who lack interest. Since humor is suggested by Lynch (2002) to release boredom and gain attraction, the consumers could still choose to engage in a socio-political issue they find “boring” since they feel that the message is humorous. The humor could result in the gain of aligned consumers for the small brand activist, which would cause sales and socio-political engagement to increase.

#### **5.4. Small Brand Activists and Their Hiring Practices**

The *hiring practices* could be argued to be of special importance to small businesses engaging in socio-political issues. To assure that all employees move in a similar direction with the brand’s values, the companies direct their efforts to the *hiring practices*. According to Mirzaei et al. (2022), purpose-driven brands such as brand activists could create emotional bonds with their consumers because of their socio-political efforts. Based on our findings, we argue that emotional bonds can also be formed between the brand and the employees if their values align. The effect of what we called *brand-employee relationship* was found to have two benefits to the company. Firstly, in accordance with Fritz et al.’s (2017) research, motivated employees are more likely to promote the brand’s values and create an authentic brand perception, which could be of certain importance for small brand activists. We found that several of the interviewed companies used their employees as an extension of the brand identity. Secondly, we build on Fritz et al.’s (2017) research and suggest that small brand activists’ *transparency* could help small brand activists in their *hiring practices* as their values are more visible to the public. Aligned stakeholders and other members of the community will then be attracted to the

small brand activist and create more opportunities for the hiring of aligned employees. With the increased number of aligned employees, the brand can drive its mission forward and more easily attract similarly aligned consumers that will increase sales.

The alignment can also benefit the brand's other practices. We found that several of the company practices were employee-initiated. co-creation research by Sonja et al. (2022) found that employees often possess direct consumer intel but are not always obligated to share the knowledge. Our findings add to Sonja et al.'s (2022) research and suggest that a strong *brand-employee relationship* can facilitate the right conditions for value creation and knowledge-sharing. The employee-initiated practices of the small brand activists could be argued to derive from the brand's smaller size, in which different management levels find it easier to interact. It should be recognized that all small brand activists took active steps to include the employees' opinion through different practices.

The *brand-employee relationship* was found to benefit the company's efficiency. The small brand activists often employed individuals that aligned with their brand values to strengthen their identity and authenticity. Our findings agree with van Tuin et al.'s (2020) research that found that purpose-driven objectives can encourage employee motivation. While the authors' research investigated the sustainability aspect of the corporate purpose, our findings add to current research with the socio-political narrative. We add to van Tuin et al.'s (2020) research and argue that small brand activists could employ aligned individuals as a practice because they have an improved causal perception of how their work impacts the brand mission. When the small brand activist can create practices that emphasize an emotional relationship between the brand mission, its socio-political issues, and how the employee's actions influence it, the employees are more likely to experience job satisfaction. The increased job satisfaction could then result in increased efficiency and engagement for the small brand activist in its socio-political issues.



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## 6. Conclusions

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To conclude, the purpose of this study was to understand and explore the practices of brand activism within small businesses and the results of these practices. We also aimed to find what role communication had in the practice of brand activism in small businesses to explain and build on the gap in previous research. Our study indicates that small brand activist's practices orbit around six different sub-themes that are interconnected with each other; *Co-Creation and Community*, *Hiring Practices*, *Relatable Communication*, *Risk Management*, *Transparency*, and *Agility*. The findings and discussion of this study have resulted in three main insights.

Firstly, we found that the practices of brand activism in small businesses are closely connected and co-created with the local community in which the brand operates, which ultimately could result in growth for the brand. Tajvidi et al. (2020) suggested that the initial company-centric approach has changed to a more customer-centric approach where brands encourage stakeholders to be part of the co-creation experience. Our research confirms this but adds and concludes that co-creation is especially true in the practices of small brand activists, where the local community serves as an environment for the small brand activist to co-create its practices in. Practices like these allow the small brand activist to achieve its socio-political goals and change the community in line with the brand activist's values. The local community exists of stakeholders that obtain the same values as and has a mutually beneficial relationship with the small brand activist, which we argue allows for co-creation.

Our claim is further strengthened by the Theory of Structuration's and the Bourdieusian perspective on strategy as practice that suggested a company's values and beliefs to be shaped by the structures and routines in society as well as the situation it is prevalent in (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Golsorkhi et al., 2015). When the perspectives were applied to brand activism in small businesses, we could see that the society, or in this case the community, affects and favor the company with new ideas for socio-political issues and increased sales. Thus, based on previous co-creation and strategy as practice research, we can conclude that activist practices in small businesses often are co-created with local stakeholders, which is a concept we termed Co-Created Brand Activism Practices in small businesses. When applied to brand activism in a small size, the concept can result in growth and increased engagement in socio-political issues.

Secondly, we found that communication plays several important roles for a small brand activist. Communication acts as the synchronization of the practices between different actors that

collaborate in co-creation. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as a communicational strategy used to influence consumer behavior. As this is true, we add that communication as *Transparency* could for a small brand activist bridge the divide between the different co-created practices. Thus, the strategies, frameworks, and ideas a small brand activist has around its *transparent* communication all affect the *relation* it has to all its stakeholders and not only the consumers.

Communication as *Transparency* could also bridge the divide between a small brand activist's corporate practice and their activist marketing message to achieve authenticity which Vredenburg et al. (2020) found crucial for successful brand activism. Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) described brand activism as a communicational strategy used to influence consumer behavior. We further build on Manfredi-Sánchez's (2019) research and add that the practices of humor that Lynch (2002) suggested produced communicative functions that can aid small brand activists via what we termed a *fun-factor* to relate to their consumers. Even if the socio-political issues the brand engages in might seem boring, a small brand activist can create engagement in their socio-political issue through humor. Our findings also suggest that the *fun-factor* can be achieved through interactive design on a small brand activist's product. Thus, a small brand activist could gain more aligned consumers and benefit from communication practices that better suit the wider public.

Thirdly, we found that the activist practices of small brand activists are not limited by fewer resources in accordance with the liability of smallness that Ulvenbladh and Barth (2021) suggested. The restricted resources instead encourage small brand activists to be innovative to stay competitive. Hydock et al. (2020) suggested that smaller brand activists could in total gain consumers since they have more consumers to gain and fewer consumers to lose. We agree with Hydock et al.'s (2020) research but emphasize that small brand activists use the circumstances to be a small actor in the socio-political market as an asset to create activist practices that capitalize on their *Agility*. Therefore, we suggest that the activist practices formed by small brand activists allow them to seize what we termed the *Benefit of Smallness*, which include benefits that large brand activists find harder to capture due to their larger size and reduced flexibility. We find this concept crucial for small brand activists to stay relevant in their socio-political issues as well as stay competitive on the market that they share with their competitors. Thus, small brand activist's practices are innovatively formed to affect more socio-political issues and gain more consumers.

## 6.1. Theoretical Contributions

Previous literature has shown brand activism to be a heterogeneous construct that embodies different types of practices (Hydock et al., 2020; Key et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wowak et al., 2022). This paper offers three theoretical contributions that expand the current literature on brand activism by directing the theoretical attention to small businesses. Firstly, our research has provided insights into the actual practices and activities small businesses perform. To the best of our knowledge, apart from Hydock et al.'s (2020) research, there have been limited attempts to explore how brand activism impacts small businesses. Our paper did not aim to replicate or test the findings of Hydock et al.'s (2020) research. However, our empirical data supports the claim that brand activism and its practices can be a valuable opportunity for small businesses.

Secondly, building on Tajvidi et al.'s (2020) research on co-creation, we identified co-creation to be an important moderator that helps small brand activists drive their socio-political goals on both an individual- and community-based level. While each of the themes we found was related to their respective brand activism practices, co-creation was found to have a direct or indirect connection to all themes. Thirdly, we build on Manfredi-Sánchez's (2019) third trait that expressed that while activist brands are viewed to communicate with local audiences, the motive for brand activism is often aimed at the larger public. We found that while small brand activists often operate on a community-based level, humor in the form of the *fun-factor* could allow small brand activists to reach the larger public with their socio-political issues.

## 6.2. Managerial Contributions

This paper contributes with three major insights to small businesses that takes or want to take a stance on socio-political issues. Firstly, our findings can provide current brand activist managers with new general practices to adopt. The general practices also provide guidelines to small businesses that have according to Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) typology, an absence of brand activism or a silent brand activism. These businesses could use the practical insight in this research to implement an authentic brand activism strategy. The examples of practices that we have presented offer abstract ideas of what activities small businesses can perform to achieve growth and simultaneously achieve their socio-political goals.

Secondly, our research could provide small brand activists to maximize their potential in the alignment with consumers to capture the wider audience. The implementation of co-created practices allows small brand activists to align their current consumers as well as attract new

audiences that occupy the same values as the brand. Moreover, the implementation of the *fun-factor* allows small brand activists to attract new consumers that are not interested in socio-political issues, but rather attracts to the brand from the use of humor. These consumers have the possibility to align with the brand's values once accustomed to the brand.

Thirdly, our findings provide brands with guidance on how to adapt practices to achieve co-creation with stakeholders. Brand activists can choose to co-create with other brands, consumers, producers, and the community that shares the values of the brand, which *The Concept of Co-Created Brand Activism Practices* conceptualizes. Furthermore, we propose that small brand activists should utilize the *Benefits of Smallness* and create practices to capitalize on their *agility*.

### **6.3. Critical Review and Future Research**

Despite this study's theoretical and managerial contributions, the research has some limitations. First, the use of only five companies has restricted the depth of our empirical findings by not accounting for a wider scope of perspectives. The trustworthiness of such a small study and its findings could be concerning since our findings might not be transferable to other contexts. Future research should expand on our research with a wider arrange of companies to investigate if there is consistency in our work or if the current library of practices should be altered. It would also be interesting to compare how our findings measure against other types of industries than the craft food and the food supplier industry. Such studies could provide different insights to practices and strategies that small brand activists perform and be applicable to and used by more small brand activists.

Second, while the Food Supplier was only in the early stages of brand activism, the data provided an outline of their current and intended practices, which we still included in our research since we found them relevant. However, few active practices related to brand activism were found, which is why the trustworthiness of the interviewee's statements and consequently the outcomes of our study can be questioned. Third, our findings are based on liberal and progressive brand activists only. Since the definition of brand activism include that the stance on a socio-political issue can be either of a progressive or conservative nature (Vredenburg et al., 2020), future research could investigate the practices of conservative small brand activists.

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## Appendix I – Interview Guide

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### A. Brand Identity

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Question 1                      What is [Brand Name]’s reason for being?

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Question 2                      Could you tell us what the brand values are?

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Question 3                      What is the company mission?

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### B. Brand Activism

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Question 4                      In what way is the brand engaging in socio-political issues?

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Question 5                      What stance are you taking on the socio-political issues you are engaging in?

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Question 6                      How do you practice brand activism?

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Question 7                      How would you describe your engagement in such issues?  
Could you give a few examples?

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Question 8                      What were the reasons that you decided to take a stance on socio-political issues?

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Question 9                      Do you see any potential risks voicing opinions on socio-political issues?

\* Do you still think its worth the risk?

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Question 10                      How do you back up your communication in socio-political issues?

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Question 11                      What corporate practices do you have?

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### C. Communication

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Question 12                      How do you communicate your values and purpose to your stakeholders?

\* To your consumers? Society? Investors? Etc

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Question 13                      Is it important for you to communicate your values in socio-political issues?

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Question 14                      Do you engage in activism to grow your business?

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Question 15                      How do you formulate your communicational strategy?

\* Is there a guide that you follow?

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Question 16	In what way do the social media platforms and webpage you are using drive your socio-political goal?
Question 17	How do you make sure that your brand message is consistent over time?

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#### **D. Marketshare**

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Question 18	How do you experience being a small business and engaging in socio-political issues? What benefits and what disadvantages do you see?
Question 19	In what way do you feel that you are achieving social change with your engagement in social issues?
Question 20	How could you overcome the liability of smallness?

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#### **E. Consumers**

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Question 21	How do you find aligned consumers in practice?
Question 22	Why do you think that your consumers choose you instead of your competitors?
Question 23	How do you feel that your consumers respond to your engagement in the socio-political issues?
Question 24	Can you recall a situation where you got noticeable backlash for one of your communication efforts?

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\* If no: Why do you think that is?

\* if yes: How do you respond to said criticism?

\* Was there any impact to the company?

Have your communication changed due to said criticism?

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#### **F. Outro-questions**

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Question 25	If we really want to understand brand activism in small businesses, what else do we need to know?
Question 26	If we would want to get a more complete view of brand activism within small businesses, who do you think I should talk to next?

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Question 27

Would you like to add anything?

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\* Prepared follow up questions

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## Appendix II – Complimentary Interview Guide

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Question 1	You mentioned the ambassador program, how does it work?
Question 2	Who do you choose to make an ambassador?
Question 3	What is the goal with it?
Question 4	Has there ever been any memorable example where an employee's idea or initiative has led to any new business practices?
Question 5	If yes, what practices was it?
Question 6	If no, what was the outcome?
Question 7	You mention that one of the hardest things is to get people to actually try your beer, what are the several practices you do to fix that?
Question 8	What activities do you perform to change the drinking culture in Australia?

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