Social Activism and Practice Diffusion: How Activist Tactics Affect Non-targeted Organizations

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Abstract
This paper examines how social activist tactics affect the diffusion of social-responsibility practices. Studying collegiate adoptions of a controversial supplier-sanction practice championed by anti-sweatshop activists, we compare how non-targeted organizations are influenced by different types of practice adoptions in their environment. Drawing on interorganizational learning theory, we argue and show that disruption-linked adoptions—those that occur following activists’ disruptive protests against the adopting organization—appear to be taken under coercive pressure and therefore provide non-targeted organizations with poor inferences about the merits of the practice. In contrast, strong inferences are provided by evidence-linked adoptions—those that occur after activists use evidence-based tactics with the adopting organization—and by independent adoptions occurring without any activism. Hence the contagious effect of independent and evidence-based adoptions is greater than that of disruption-linked adoptions. We further explore differences in receptivity to contagious influence, proposing that features of an organization and its proximal environment that increase issue salience also increase susceptibility to diffusion. Our findings demonstrate the importance of including non-targeted organizations in research on social movements and corporate social responsibility. They also offer a new vantage for interorganizational diffusion research, based on how activists and other third parties shape organizational decision makers’ inferences.

Keywords: social movements, diffusion, interorganizational learning, social activist tactics, corporate social responsibility

Organizational scholars have recently explored how social activists target organizations to increase their social responsibility and how in some cases they

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successfully pressure those organizations to revise practices and policies in line with activists’ social-responsibility goals (Eesley and Lenox, 2006; Walker, Martin, and McCarthy, 2008; Soule, 2009; King and Pearce, 2010). An emerging theme in this research is that the different campaign tactics used by activists can influence their success. For example, researchers have found that activists can be successful when they engage in disruptive tactics, such as sit-ins and boycotts, which aim to impede an organization’s routines or threaten its public reputation (Davis et al., 2005; Rojas, 2006; King, 2008; Bartley and Child, 2011). Such disruptive tactics can lead the directly targeted organizational decision makers to amend or adopt organizational practices to meet activists’ demands, effectively granting concessions to the activists to end the disruption.

Yet of all the organizations in a sector or industry that activists hope to influence, only a small set are usually targeted for protest (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007). Hence as scholars turn to consider how activism influences changes beyond the direct sites of contestation (Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch, 2003; Briscoe and Murphy, 2012; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012), an important question involves the effectiveness of different activist tactics in inducing practice adoption by non-targeted organizations. A few prior studies have considered the effects of activism (but not tactics) on diffusion. For example, Haveman, Rao, and Paruchuri (2007) argued that a social movement’s successes could produce wider change by spreading the movement’s values, Briscoe and Safford (2008) argued that activist-targeted companies become more susceptible to adopting controversial practices, and Schneiberg (2013) argued that social movements support the diffusion of practices consistent with movements’ values. Yet the systematic relationship between activism against targeted organizations and changes in non-targeted organizations remains unclear.

To understand that relationship better, we draw on interorganizational learning and diffusion theory to conceptualize activists’ successes as an integral part of the inferential information available to non-targeted organizational decision makers. Viewed in this way, activism can affect the rational inferences that shape adoption decisions among those non-targeted organizations. Interorganizational diffusion theory highlights a vicarious learning dynamic in which organizational decision makers facing uncertainty about how to respond to a new practice will imitate the recent behavior of peer organizations regarding that practice (Cyert and March, 1963). An increase in prior adoptions can provide a strengthening social inference about the practice’s merits, fueling further diffusion. This diffusion dynamic has been found for a wide range of organizational practices involving corporate structures and practices (Davis and Greve, 1997; Sanders and Tuschke, 2007; Fiss, Kennedy, and Davis, 2012), university curricula and career systems (Kraatz, 1998; Park, Sine, and Tolbert, 2011), and hospital and non-profit management practices (Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell, 1997; Hwang and Powell, 2009; Kennedy and Fiss, 2009).

When activist tactics are connected with the diffusion process, they can affect it by strengthening or weakening the positive inference provided by past adoptions. Generally speaking, past adoptions provide a positive but ambiguous baseline inference that the practice has rational merit, as observing decision makers infer that their peers in the adopting organization evaluated information about the practice and found it compelling (Strang and Macy, 2001; Greve,
Various traits of prior-adopting organizations may strengthen the positive inference; for example, organizations with high status may generate stronger inferences because they are assumed to have access to better information and analysis (Strang and Still, 2004). In exploring how activism becomes part of this inference material for decision makers, we argue that inferences about the merits of a controversial practice will be influenced by how prior practice adoptions are visibly associated with different activist tactics. We tested our arguments in a strategic research setting involving the adoption of supplier sanctions by U.S. colleges and universities against a prominent apparel manufacturer, taking place during a nine-month period in 2009 when anti-sweatshop campus activists were campaigning for those sanctions.

**CONTAGIOUS DIFFUSION AND INFERENCES FROM PRIOR ADOPTIONS**

Organizational decision makers face risk and uncertainty in deciding their response to a new organizational practice that has entered their organizational field. According to interorganizational learning theory, managers are assumed to be boundedly rational, such that they intend to justify their decisions using rational criteria but are prone to using shortcuts, given uncertainty and cognitive limitations (March and Simon, 1958; Greve, 1998, 2005). For managers considering a new practice, their observations of peer organizations deciding to adopt provide such a cognitive shortcut in lieu of the costly gathering of more detailed information about the practice (March, 1991; Levinthal and March, 1993; Haunschild and Miner, 1997). Hence managers are understood to use prior adoptions as social proof of the practice’s merits, leading to a pattern of interorganizational imitation or learning when organizations adopting a new practice have a contagious influence on other organizations that follow suit (Cyert and March, 1963; Rao, Greve, and Davis, 2001).

In some forms of interorganizational learning, organizations imitate a spreading new practice without deliberating much about the particular circumstances surrounding prior adoptions (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993; Burns and Wholey, 1993). Often, however, organizations learn selectively depending on the characteristics of prior adopting organizations or other inferences that are indicative of the practice’s merits (e.g., Greve, 1998; Strang and Still, 2004; Rhee, Kim, and Han, 2006). For example, referent organizations may be more influential if they have high status, visibility, or other attributes that increase the perceived rational value or sociopolitical legitimacy of the practice (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Haveman, 1993; Miner and Raghavan, 1999; Baum, Li, and Usher, 2000; Terlaak and Gong, 2008).

Positive organizational performance effects that appear to be associated with adoptions can also strengthen a favorable inference about the practice, contributing to diffusion (Haunschild and Miner, 1997). Conversely, negative outcomes associated with adoptions, such as negative media coverage, may contribute inferences of more mixed benefits and costs from prior adoptions, slowing diffusion (Briscoe and Murphy, 2012). The consistency or variance in information associated with prior adoptions may also affect inferences, such that inconsistent or contradictory evidence on the effects of practice adoptions may inhibit diffusion (Rhee, Kim, and Han, 2006; Gaba and Terlaak, 2013). The pattern of organizations that do not adopt can also contribute to forming inferences (Terlaak and Gong, 2008). The visible information associated with prior
adoptions can thus strengthen or weaken inferences about the merits of the practice, in turn amplifying or suppressing subsequent diffusion to other organizations.

Effect of Activist Tactics on Inferences from Prior Adoptions

Given the research on interorganizational learning, the tactics that activists use and that are associated with practice adoption will become part of the inference material available to observing decision makers. Although diffusion researchers have not generally considered the role of activists in interorganizational learning, a few scholars have suggested that activists can be seen as partisan advocates, like management consultants, who actively promote (or oppose) the spread of practices by theorizing and publicizing the practice along with adoptions by exemplar organizations (Strang and Macy, 2001; Raeburn, 2004; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008). When a prior organizational practice adoption is visibly associated with the influence of outside activists, this association will naturally become an element of the inference material available to observing decision makers in other organizations. Although certain forms of quiet activism may not become visible to observing non-target decision makers, activism is often designed to gain attention, thus sparking discussion among organizational administrators, activists, and other observers across the organizational field (Polletta, 1998; Bartley and Child, 2011; Earl and Kimport, 2011).

Activist tactics associated with prior adoptions can complicate the inferences that observers make because they create ambiguity about whether the prior adoption was the result of autonomous decision making or was instead influenced by pressure from outside the organization. Activist tactics that are disruptive may create more questions about the role of outside influence on practice adoption. As a result, disruptive tactics may have a negative effect on inferences about the organizational practice’s intrinsic merit—the perceived value for organizations to adopt the practice, independent of considerations related to activist pressure. Observers are likely to believe that disruptive protest tactics played at least a partial role in compelling an organizational adoption decision that followed soon after the protest tactic was deployed. Although this observation does not necessarily negate the possibility that the practice would have been adopted independently, it shifts perceptions toward the possibility that the practice adoption was more forced than autonomous. For example, if a given university adopted a new social-responsibility practice shortly after students advocating for that practice occupied an administrative building for several days, observers may infer that the practice was influenced by a decision maker’s desire to end that disruptive tactic. This line of thinking is consistent with cognitive decision-making studies that show that information has a greater effect on peers’ behavior when it is seen to be independent rather than a result of normative pressure (Turner, 1991; Mummendey and Wenzel, 1999).

Contributing to this negative effect on inferences, activists often celebrate disruption-linked practice adoptions as successes specifically caused by their...
disruptive tactics. They do this in hopes that successes will encourage others
to participate in the movement (Meyer and Whittier, 1994), but paradoxically it
may limit observing decision makers’ perceptions of the practice’s independent
merits. Even when organizational decision makers make public or private com-
ments denouncing the disruptive tactics, this may raise the visibility of the activ-
ists’ tactics and increase their cognitive association with the organizational
adoption decision in the minds of observers.

In contrast, adoptions of a controversial practice that are not linked to disrup-
tive tactics provide a clearer inference that others in the field are accepting the
practice on its own merits. This line of reasoning is consistent with Strang and
Meyer’s (1993) arguments that a context in which adopters are viewed as
autonomous and empowered will fuel diffusion, because these actors are
believed to have acted out of self-interest to generate optimal outcomes for
themselves—suggesting to others that following suit by replicating those
actions should generate favorable outcomes for them as well. Thus we offer
the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Compared with disruption-linked adoptions, independent adop-
tions will be more contagious in the interorganizational diffusion of a controversial
practice.

Other types of protest tactics may provide different inferences for observing
decision makers responding to a diffusing controversial practice, in particular,
protest tactics that are explicitly non-disruptive and non-confrontational in their
approach. Non-disruptive tactics seek to bring about a change in the orienta-
tions of audiences, including targeted decision makers, by conveying the need
or value in adopting the proposed practice (Gamson, 1968). A common form of
non-disruptive tactic is an evidence-based tactic: the provision of information
and/or material evidence to enhance the credibility of activists and the practices
they seek to bring about (Benford and Snow, 2000).

The effectiveness of evidence-based tactics does not depend on disruption
but instead appears to operate through persuasion. Evidence-based tactics are
designed to provide or support a justifying account for practice adoption that
positively influences the targeted decision makers. For example, evidence-
based tactics may involve testimonials from people adversely affected by exist-
ing practices or positively affected by new practices (e.g., McCarthy, Wolfson,
and Harvey, 1987; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Taylor et al., 2009). Other types of
evidence-based tactics include events that publicize scientific information about
the costs and benefits of changing practices (e.g., Sine and Lee, 2009; Hiatt,
Sine, and Tolbert, 2009). The common thread is that evidence-based tactics are
aimed at creating pressure by contributing information that is directly relevant
to the decision-making processes of the targeted organization. Though
evidence-based tactics are not always effective in their intended goal of directly
influencing targeted decision makers, to our knowledge, no studies have been
conducted that empirically assess their efficacy.

Yet when evidence-based tactics are effective in directly influencing targeted
decision makers to adopt new practices, it follows that they then become part
of the inferential material available to observers. Hence our interest is in the
influence that successful evidence-based tactics have on diffusion to non-
targeted organizations. When non-targeted decision makers observe adoption
linked to evidence-based tactics, they may still be uncertain about the role of activism in influencing adoption, but because the tactic involved the transmission of practice-related information, they should infer that information conveyed through the tactic helped persuade the targeted decision makers to adopt. Such an inference should contribute positively to the diffusion process to the extent that it tilts observing non-targeted decision makers toward the perception that the practice has merits within a rational decision-making framework shared across organizations. By observing evidence-based tactics in connection with prior practice adoption, other decision makers can infer that the evidentiary information fit into that prior adopter’s normal decision-making process—the stylized process of choosing among alternative actions to maximize net organizational benefits (March and Simon, 1958; Strang and Still, 2006).

Adoptions linked to evidence-based tactics need not signal fully autonomous decision making, as activism is still present. But in the absence of disruptive pressure, observers may infer that the information generated by the tactic contributed to the perceived rationality of practice adoption as an organizationally appropriate behavior.

The positive inference effect of evidence-based tactics may subsequently be reinforced as adopting decision makers explain their behavior. Although organizational decision makers generally distance themselves from activists and their claims, information supplied through non-disruptive evidence-based tactics may be viewed less skeptically. As long as the information was provided in a legitimate manner, adopting decision makers may openly discuss the content that influenced them, for example, by sharing personal testimonials or scientific statistics that support and explain their practice adoption. Such developments would reinforce the inference that the practice was adopted by informed decision makers who saw its merits, thus reducing the amount of local promotion required of other decision makers considering adoption (Strang and Meyer, 1993) and facilitating contagious diffusion. These arguments lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Compared with disruption-linked adoptions, evidence-linked adoptions will be more contagious in the interorganizational diffusion of a controversial practice.

Influence of Issue Salience on Contagious Diffusion

Controversial organizational practices are linked to broader societal issues that vary in their salience to decision makers. When the broader issue becomes more salient, this can affect organizational responses to practice diffusion by directing stakeholders’ attention and pressuring decision makers to monitor the issue and ensure they are acting appropriately. Here we consider two general sources of issue salience that are related to activism and controversial practice diffusion, involving conditions within the focal organization and conditions in its proximal environment: prior commitments that are in accord with a practice and disruptive protests in an organization’s proximity.

First, within the focal organization, prior commitments that are consonant with the controversial practice will have the effect of increasing the issue’s salience. Consonant commitments may take the form of earlier official proclamations regarding the organization’s values, goals, or interests, which now
implicate the organization’s behavior in relation to the controversial practice. For example, an organization that released a corporate social responsibility (CSR) report stating its strong emphasis on gender equality may be implicated when activists campaign to increase female representation in top management. An increasingly common form of consonant commitment is organizational participation in private regulation, which involves voluntary bodies that define and sometimes monitor the application of standards for responsible conduct (Bartley, 2007; Locke, Qin, and Brause, 2007; Zietsma and McKnight, 2009; Timmermans and Epstein, 2010; Mena and Waeger, 2014). Examples include the Rainforest Alliance, the Global Business Initiative on Human Rights, and the Fair Labor Association (Baron, 2003; Bartley, 2005; Schneiberg and Bartley, 2008). Organizations with such prior commitments will experience heightened salience when the controversial practice enters their environment. Decision makers in these organizations may be more open to persuasion in relation to the practice, as they have already accepted part of the values and agenda of the movement (della Porta and Rucht, 2002; Hernes and Mikalsen, 2002). In addition, they may be aware of stakeholders who are scrutinizing the organization’s behavior in relation to the new practice in light of the consonant commitments (Christensen and Langer, 2009; Mena and Waeger, 2014).

In the wake of heightened issue salience, organizational decision makers will monitor events related to the issue and consider the possible merits and methods of responding to the issue (Getz, 1997; Baron, 2001; Bonardi and Keim, 2005). This monitoring and consideration will involve giving greater attention to relevant information and signals regarding the merits and risks of a controversial practice that has entered the organization’s environment. For example, decision makers will attend to other recent proximal practice adoptions and the information cascade that such adoptions represent (Rao, Greve, and Davis, 2001).

Although an issue’s salience will increase attention to prior practice adoptions of all types, it will not necessarily make decision makers more susceptible to all adoptions uniformly. Disruption-linked adoptions will still provide a muddy signal as to the rational merits of the practice, despite increased salience. But the issue’s salience should increase responsiveness to independent and evidence-linked adoptions, as these forms of adoption provide positive inferences about the rational merits of the practice. Hence we offer the following hypotheses involving the moderating effects of consonant commitments on the contagiousness of independent and evidence-linked adoptions:

**Hypothesis 3a (H3a):** The contagiousness of independent adoptions will be greater among organizations that hold consonant commitments related to the controversial practice.

**Hypothesis 3b (H3b):** The contagiousness of evidence-linked adoptions will be greater among organizations that hold consonant commitments related to the controversial practice.

The second source of issue salience involves disruptive protests that occur in an organization’s proximal environment. Social activists often pursue disruptive protests to raise awareness and mobilize public opinion (Oberschall, 1973; Gusfield, 1981). Regardless of whether those disruptive protests drive practice adoption or achieve any other goals, their newsworthiness is likely to bring
attention to the issue (Lipsky, 1968). Disruptions that are levied at competitive rivals germane to a focal organization’s strategy and identity will increase the salience of the issue and the associated practice for the focal organization (Bundy, Shropshire, and Buchholtz, 2013).

In addition to focusing the attention of decision makers who regularly scan events related to their organizational rivals (Briscoe and Murphy, 2012), news of proximal disruptions will bring greater awareness of the practice to the focal organization’s stakeholders, whose interests and identities are connected to the focal organization and who therefore perceive the potential relevance of events and news related to its rivals (Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003; Bundy, Shropshire, and Buchholtz, 2013). For example, when a consumer product firm’s competitor experiences a disruptive boycott, the focal firm’s employees and suppliers may take notice and consider how they are implicated in the issue that inspired the boycott. In a university context, one school’s students and alumni may become more attentive to an issue advanced by campus activists when they learn of disruptive protests occurring at rival schools.

As with consonant commitments, proximal disruption will heighten decision makers’ attention to the controversial practice and to its adoption by peer organizations. While this heightened attention may not yield an increased response to the ambiguous signal of disruption-linked adoptions, following our arguments above, it should increase susceptibility to independent and evidence-linked adoptions:

Hypothesis 4a (H4a): The contagiousness of independent adoptions will rise as organizations witness proximal disruption related to the controversial practice.

Hypothesis 4b (H4b): The contagiousness of evidence-linked adoptions will rise as organizations witness proximal disruption related to the controversial practice.

METHOD

To explore the diffusion effects of tactics used by social activists, we studied the rapid adoption of a supplier-sanction practice across U.S. colleges and universities. Activists called for this sanction in response to the supplier’s non-compliance with its code of conduct. This setting allowed us to hold key factors constant while studying the effects of different tactics on diffusion. Different types of tactics were deployed by activists at different schools as part of the same issue campaign; adoptions occurred at a wide range of schools, including schools where each tactic occurred, as well as schools that did not experience tactics; and the entire campaign and sanction behavior took place in a relatively rapid time frame during which a common issue framing was articulated by the wider anti-sweatshop umbrella movement.

Our study of the campaign and sanction diffusion process draws on 27 interviews with activists and college and university administrators (licensing directors and student affairs vice presidents). Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol. Interviews with activists focused on target and tactic choices, perceptions of the administration’s decision making, and the role of different communication and influence channels in diffusion. Interviews with administrators focused on perceptions of activism and tactics, decision-making structures and outcomes, and communication
channels across schools. To maximize variance on the topics of theoretical interest, we selected administrators and activists associated with both adoption and non-adoption and with different tactics. In addition, we collected and reviewed over 200 archival documents, including college and university procurement policies and announcements, meeting minutes, campaign materials, supplier press releases and customer communications, and media stories related to the campaign.

Research Context: Collegiate Anti-sweatshop Activism

The Rein-in-Russell campaign was organized by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) campus activists during the winter and spring of 2009. This campaign aimed to convince large numbers of colleges and universities to adopt supplier sanctions against Russell Athletic based on worker-rights violations at its manufacturing plants in Honduras. The sanctions consisted of terminating apparel-licensing contracts with Russell until the violations were resolved. After nine months, enough schools had agreed to adopt supplier sanctions that Russell agreed to make changes advocated by USAS. The success of this campaign marked the first time that a large number of schools conceded that violations of their CSR procurement standards should result in contract suspension, as espoused by activists—an important precedent in the views of both activists and administrators we interviewed.

USAS focuses on factory conditions for workers who make garments, including sweatshirts and other clothing marketed on campuses with university branding printed on them. Its specific concerns are factory conditions involving long hours, low wages, and lack of respect for workers’ basic right to organize. By 2009, USAS was an established national student organization with chapters on 158 U.S. university and college campuses. For over a decade, USAS campaigns targeted university administrators with the goal of ensuring that university-branded apparel was sweatshop-free, through supplier codes of conduct coupled with strong sanction and enforcement mechanisms (Ross, 1997; Bonacich and Appelbaum, 2000; Rosen, 2002; Esbenshade, 2004; Bartley and Child, 2011).

Within colleges and universities, the targeted decision makers for USAS were relatively senior administrators. In most cases, the head of the university’s licensing and trademark office was the person responsible for dealing with and remediating any allegations of misconduct from the licensee apparel firms. Issues could often escalate to the president or provost’s office when external stakeholders, including monitoring groups and activists, found the normal course of remediation to be unsatisfactory. Most university license offices had ties with licensing firms such as the Collegiate Licensing Corporation, and many also subscribed to the private regulatory group Fair Labor Association (FLA) and/or the independent Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), which monitored and evaluated licensees’ conduct.

In many respects, the 2009 Rein-in-Russell campaign resembled earlier USAS campaigns: USAS activists claimed that universities were responsible, through their procurement practices, for ensuring that workers’ rights were upheld by their apparel suppliers. They argued that the suffering of factory-worker victims could be remedied if universities applied sanctions on suppliers with workers’ rights violations by terminating their contracts with those
suppliers until the grievance was redressed. The specific concern in the Russell campaign involved two Russell-owned factories in Honduras in which legal unionization to improve wages and conditions was followed by mass firings and plans for plant closure (USAS, 2011). USAS demanded that universities adopt sanctions on Russell until the firm reinstated workers and resumed union recognition.

The movement’s demand for universities to terminate their contracts with Russell was controversial from administrators’ point of view. Collegiate apparel licensing is a $4.5 billion industry, and many universities rely on a portion of this revenue stream coming to them each year through licensing agreements (McCarthy, 2011). Collegiate athletics drive a significant portion of the industry, with school-logo apparel being purchased by students, alumni, and other fans.

USAS consistently framed the issue as a violation of worker and human rights and the pressing need for corporations to engage in responsible behavior toward their employees. At the time of the Rein-in-Russell campaign, although administrators endorsed the broad goals of the movement, they questioned the credibility of the movement’s specific claims and the corresponding legitimacy of their specific demands. They raised questions about whether workers were really suffering from current conditions and whether proposed sanctions and changes in procurement practices would really improve workers’ lives. One of the persistent challenges for USAS was to convince administrators and others that USAS understood and could effectively represent victims—i.e., poor and vulnerable garment workers living in culturally and geographically distant countries.

Deployment of activist tactics. In line with their usual tactical efforts, USAS activists in the Russell campaign pursued disruption-based tactics on many campuses, such as sit-ins, demonstrations shutting down administrative buildings, and picket lines at campus or near-campus apparel stores. These tactics were aimed at applying pressure on university administrators by incurring costs for the university organization; they were also intended to increase attention to the anti-sweatshop issue among students and other community members. Not surprisingly, these disruptive tactics were not received well by university administrators. The following comment is representative of responses among the administrators we interviewed:

[With] more aggressive forms of activism, we are not going to react in the way you want us to react, because we are just not going to encourage that sort of behavior—and conceding to demands will be encouraging that sort of behavior. So it is less about the issue involved—less about Russell and what is happening with workers around the globe—than it is about the tactic itself and how we don’t want to encourage others who may be active on some other fronts to use that tactic. We dedicate resources to address it, we are going to cut it off at the beginning. We are going to make a statement about what our expectations are, about how we want to interact.

As part of the campaign, USAS also incorporated a non-disruptive evidence-based tactic in the form of worker-testimonial visits to several campuses: USAS brought aggrieved workers—individuals who could legitimately express the grievance as a function of their own personal experience—into direct contact with members of the organizational community whose practices they were
contesting. The workers’ visits were billed as educational events and were explicitly non-confrontational in their design. Given limited time and resources, two sequences of visits were scheduled—one on the East Coast, followed by one on the West Coast—each focusing on a set of schools that could be connected by a short car drive. At each school, the event format resembled an evening educational seminar or speaker event. These worker–audience interactions allowed community members from the targeted colleges and universities to learn about the Honduran factory workers’ daily lives. Victims described health problems brought on by being overworked to make quotas and by poor air quality; other workers recounted forced overtime and timecard manipulation practices. One college newspaper reported this testimonial from a female worker who spoke during one of the campus visits: “When she missed a thread or didn’t meet a product goal, she said her supervisor, a much bigger male, would slap her in the face and this would happen virtually every day” (Perez, 2009).

Administrators we interviewed concerning disruptive USAS tactics consistently characterized them as unconstructive. But administrators who experienced the workers’ visits saw them in a strikingly different light, characterizing them as reasonable or even informative activities that complemented their own efforts to learn about working conditions associated with their licensed suppliers. One apparel-licensing director we interviewed said of the workers’ visits:

They are an important thing. . . . We need to hear when things are not going as they should, we need a mechanism to communicate that. Day in and day out, how do workers or other NGOs that may become aware of a problem in a factory, how do we learn about it? There needs to be a hotline so to speak to get that back to the university or the community in general. I see the worker [testimonial] tour as an amplification of that, a very important one. It’s so tangible, and they are real people that have faces and names and voices that we’re hearing in real time.

We found no examples of administrators objecting to the workers’ visits, and the visits did not lead to any retaliation by administrators. In contrast, disruption-based tactics did in some cases result in arrests and/or disciplinary action against activists.

Inferences about supplier sanctions, and interorganizational diffusion. University administrators at other schools learned about the activist tactics and sanction adoptions through news reports, as well as interuniversity networks. Licensing directors and their staff shared information and views on the Russell campaign activity through direct contact, as well as via e-mail listservs, discussion groups, and online newsletters run by the International Collegiate Licensing Association (ICLA), the Collegiate Licensing Company (CLC), and the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC). Our interviews indicated that licensing directors were particularly attuned to activities at peer schools as defined by their collegiate athletic identities. For example, members of the Big 10 athletic conference attended to events and decisions at other Big 10 schools.

As word spread to other decision makers from schools adopting supplier sanctions, information about associated activist tactics and public support was
also included. One university official we interviewed indicated that administra-
tor listserv discussions helped to connect tactics and practices:

\[ \ldots \text{in between [semi-annual conference] meetings we have listservs where they are}
\text{constantly sending messages—they get into discussions that way about these}
\text{issues, they talk about what’s happening on their campuses, they talk about the acti-
\text{vists, what kind of communications they have been having with the activists, what}
\text{kinds of actions the activists have been taking, sort of comparing notes on how their}
\text{universities are responding to those actions.} \]

Our interviews suggested that administrators formed different inferences
after learning about peer-school sanctions, depending on the circumstances at
the peer school. Licensing managers frequently implied that they discounted
disruption-linked adoptions; one licensing director commented, “Personally, I
do not find cancellations under duress as influential—it’s knee jerk, usually to
get an issue off your desk.” Another informant we interviewed revealed his
doubts about the meaning of a peer school’s adoption under disruptive pres-
sure. He first recounted what his peer-school colleague told the activists: “He
told them, ‘If you’re going to go all burning-torches-and-pitchforks at the steps
of our press office, we’re simply not going to respond.’” Our informant then
offered his own interpretation of subsequent sanction adoption at that school:
“They did respond in the end, but it was obvious they were doing it to get past
the combativeness.” As this shows, his attention was focused on the disrup-
tive activities as opposed to the implications or merits of the practice itself.

In contrast, inferences from the evidence-linked adoptions tended to reflect
a level of respect accorded to the evidence-based tactic and how it could influ-
ence adoption decisions. When asked about a peer school’s sanction adoption,
one manager responded, “They had the worker tour just beforehand, and we
heard all about it. What was conveyed there, it was very concrete. It spoke
directly to the code of conduct issue. So when they did decide to cancel, it
weighed heavily on us.” Although there was variation, administrators we inter-
viewed generally appeared to form positive inferences from evidence-linked
adoptions and negative or ambiguous inferences from disruption-linked
adoptions.

Data, Sample, and Modeling Strategy
We analyzed the interorganizational diffusion of supplier sanctions among
major universities and colleges during the 2009 Rein-in-Russell campaign. As a
starting point for defining the diffusion risk set, we used the 357 universities
and colleges designated as National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)
Division I multi-sport conference member schools in 2009, which all have sig-
nificant apparel licensing programs that generate revenue through sales of
university-branded clothing. The licensing directors who managed appare-
supplier relations in these schools were housed in the athletics administration
or worked closely with athletics administrators. We next identified schools that
had licensing contracts in place with Russell Corporation at the start of 2009
and were therefore at risk of adopting the supplier sanction practice. We
assembled this information from activist and newspaper records related to the
campaign (described below), as well as from the databases of the two largest
licensing firms, Collegiate Licensing Company and Licensing Resource Group. Just two schools were identified as non-Russell licensors; they were dropped, resulting in a final risk set of 355 schools.

Our primary data came from multiple sources, including university press releases, newspaper articles, the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), and the Gourman Report. Our data were structured for event history analysis using days as the units of time. The start of the time window (December 5, 2008) preceded the first known supplier-sanction event, and the closing of the time window (August 30, 2009, 265 days later) followed Russell Athletic announcing changes consistent with activists’ demands following the last supplier-sanction event.

We used the heterogeneous diffusion model (Strang and Tuma, 1993) to model the factors that influenced the likelihood of universities adopting the supplier-sanction practice. This modeling strategy allowed us to examine how prior adoptions with and without the presence of activist tactics affected the subsequent spread of practice adoption to other universities. In general, this class of event history models is well suited for understanding practice adoption across a complex, segmented landscape of actors (Davis and Greve, 1997; Soule, 1997; Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006). Standard notation for the heterogeneous diffusion model denotes n as a focal actor and s as another actor that can potentially influence that focal actor. Four separate vectors are specified in the model: \( X_n \) is a vector of variables affecting n’s intrinsic propensity to terminate (propensity); \( V_n \) is a vector representing n’s susceptibility to the influence of s’s behavior (susceptibility); \( W_s \) is a vector representing the strength of an s’s influence on others (contagiousness); and \( Z_{ns} \) is a vector representing aspects of the social proximity or connection between n and s pairs (specified as the conduit of diffusion). The hazard rate for n’s adoption at time t is then specified by:

\[
r_n(t) = \exp(\alpha X_n) + \exp(\beta V_n) \sum_{s \in S(t)} \exp(\gamma W_s + \delta Z_{ns})
\]

The heterogeneous diffusion model allows characteristics of alters (s’s) to influence a focal organization (n) differentially. One unusual feature of the model is that it allows the same characteristics to be entered as independent variables in more than one vector. In our models in particular, we examined how evidence-based tactics and disruption-based tactics affect the focal organization’s likelihood of adoption—and also how those same tactics in association with prior adoptions affect the contagious influence of those prior adopters.

**Diffusion through intercollegiate networks.** Following prior research that emphasizes the importance of social proximity for the diffusion process, we modeled diffusion through networks defined by NCAA intercollegiate athletic conferences, e.g., the Big 10, Ivy League, and Pacific 12 conferences. This choice reflects the central importance of athletic programs to school licensing departments and the institutionalized orientation of collegiate athletic departments toward peer organizations defined by conference rivalries. This network diffusion model allowed each instance of prior adoption to influence all those organizations that are network-proximal to the adopting organization for all
those days subsequent to the adoption event. Two alternative specifications, using WRC membership as a network and modeling diffusion as a field-level process, yielded similar findings but inferior model fit. Our college and university data encompassed 34 athletic conferences, with an average membership of 10.4 schools per conference.

Two-stage modeling to account for locations of activism. To account for potential selection biases in activists’ tactical efforts, we ran a first-stage Cox regression model predicting the time of use of tactics by activists across campuses. Political opportunity theory suggests that activism is more likely to arise at organizations where the conditions are more favorable (Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan, 1992). We included an instrumental variable in the first-stage model for prior activism at schools that significantly predicts the use of tactics by activists but does not predict adoption of practices. The details about other variables are provided in the Online Appendix (http://asq.sagepub.com/supplemental). We used the prediction values from this model as a control variable in our main model, called activist tactics opportunity structure. We included this variable in the propensity vector to capture the effect that selectively targeted organizations may be more likely to adopt the practice themselves, as well as in the contagiousness vector to capture the possibility that those targeted organizations may be more influential on others.

Dependent Variable

Adoption of supplier sanctions. Our dependent variable is the date on which each college or university in our sample applied sanctions on Russell by terminating and agreeing not to renew its licensing contract without the firm ceding to the specified activist demands. We coded these dates from information found in college and university press releases, in newspaper articles, and on the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) website. There were 75 supplier-sanction events that occurred over time in our sample of schools.

Independent Variables

All prior adoptions. This time-varying measure includes all adoptions by schools within the network of the focal school. As entered in model 1, this variable tests whether practice adoption in the organizational field was fueled through the general diffusion process (among network-proximal organizations) in which the increasing prevalence of a practice among peer organizations propels other organizations to adopt it. In model 2, we replaced this variable with the following three variables categorized by association of activist tactics.

Disruption-linked adoptions. This time-varying variable reflects the count of prior adoptions within a school’s network that were coupled with disruption-based tactics (included in the propensity vector). We coded the presence and timing of disruption-based tactics during the study period by tracking anti-sweatshop protests that incorporated a more confrontational approach. We categorized tactics as disruption-based if they were intended to influence organizational decision makers by disrupting organizational routines; examples include holding large gatherings outside the university president’s office,
occupying and shutting down administrative buildings, and holding picketing demonstrations at retail apparel stores on or near campus, such as the college bookstore. We included 27 such events that were staged by student activists on college and university campuses, at nearby administrative buildings, or at nearby retail stores; six of those events were successful, based on adoption occurring after the event.

Evidence-linked adoptions. This time-varying variable reflects the count of prior adoptions within a school’s network that were coupled with evidence-based tactics (included in the propensity vector). We coded the presence and timing of the evidence-based tactics using detailed information on the victim-testimonial events organized by USAS. We considered these tactics to be evidence-based because activists clearly intended them to influence organizational decision makers by strengthening the evidentiary basis for the ongoing claim of harm caused by the existing organizational procurement policies. We obtained information about these worker testimonial events from media reports and corroborated them with key informants from USAS. There were 23 victim-testimonial events altogether; 18 were successful, based on adoption occurring after the event. Only one school experienced both disruptive and evidence-based tactics.

Independent adoptions. We constructed this variable to indicate the schools that did not experience any activist tactics but still adopted the practice. There were 52 such adoption events that were not associated with any visible signs of activism. We confirmed the absence of activism from our interviews with activists and administrators.

Consonant commitment. Our measure of consonant commitment is based on organizational participation in a private regulatory initiative involving the Fair Labor Association (FLA) Code of Conduct at the time of the Russell campaign. FLA is a major private regulatory body created to uphold basic workplace standards prescribed by the International Labor Organization (ILO). Through their FLA memberships, affiliated schools had made public commitments to the issue of fair labor and workers’ rights in their procurement and licensing of collegiate-branded merchandise. Data on college and university participants were made available by the FLA.

Proximal disruption. Our measure of proximal disruption in the network reflects the time-varying count of peers within the focal school’s network that had experienced disruptive tactics, irrespective of those peer schools’ response to the practice. This count is based on tactic deployment dates, whereas the disruption-linked adoptions variable is based on the dates that universities adopted supplier sanctions.

Activist group presence. We coded whether each school had a USAS chapter at the start of the study time window. These data were obtained from a USAS website and triangulated with information from media reports and key informants associated with the movement. Of the 355 sampled schools, 99 had activist groups present during the study.

Control Variables

Organizational allies. We controlled for the presence of organizational allies using a dichotomous variable for colleges and universities with labor studies departments. Movements may be more effective when they have connections
to powerful allies who support their cause both materially and symbolically (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Jenkins and Eckert, 1986). Labor studies departments in schools may be sympathetic allies for the movement organizers, as they may provide activists with insider access to the administration, as well as knowledge about organizing. These data were obtained from the Centre for Labor Education and Research clearinghouse database at the University of Hawaii.

Financial performance. The political mediation model emphasizes the importance of favorable conditions in shaping the response of targeted organizations to social movement demands (Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan, 1992). We controlled for financial performance using a continuous variable for the percent change in each school’s endowment from 2008 to 2009. During that year period, stock markets and college and university endowment levels declined broadly, with some schools suffering significantly more than others.

Additional controls. We controlled for organizational size: universities’ total unduplicated student headcount, logged. Our measure of organizational prestige was obtained from Gourman Report (1998 edition, which was the latest version).

RESULTS

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and correlations for our sample of colleges and universities. Figure 1 shows the rapid adoption of supplier sanctions during the 265-day Rein-in-Russell campaign, reaching 21.1 percent of organizations (75 of 355 schools) by the end of the study window when Russell capitulated. The 75 adopters together represent 41.5 percent of total college and university revenues in our sample, and they include nearly half of the Top 100 Collegiate Licensors for 2009.

Activists at different schools had mounted both disruptive and evidence-based tactics in efforts to raise awareness, mobilize the public, and influence adoption behavior. Preliminary analysis suggests that both types of tactics influenced the direct probability of sanction adoption at the schools where they were deployed. The unadjusted frequency of sanction adoption was 17 percent for schools that did not experience any tactics (52 of 306 schools), rising to 22.22 percent for schools that experienced disruptive tactics (6 of 27 schools) and an impressive 78.26 percent for schools that experienced evidence-based tactics (18 of 23 schools). Only one school experienced both types of tactics, and it adopted the supplier sanction. The multivariate results described below also support a direct effect of both tactics on adoption at targeted organizations.

At the same time, it is clear that activism itself did not drive the larger pattern of practice adoption on its own. Only 30.7 percent of adopting schools experienced tactics of any type on their campuses (23 of 75), and only 54.7 percent of adopting schools even had USAS activist groups formed on campus (41 of 75). This preliminary evidence suggests a strong role for interorganizational diffusion in driving the larger pattern of practice adoptions.

Table 2 presents the results of heterogeneous diffusion models predicting the adoption and diffusion of supplier sanctions across schools. Model 1 is a baseline model showing general contagion from prior sanction adoptions, models 2 to 5 include contagiousness variables reflecting prior adoptions linked to
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation (N = 355)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Adoptions (all)*</td>
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<td>0.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Adoptions (disruption-linked)*</td>
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<td>0.27</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Adoptions (independent)*</td>
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<td>0.79</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Adoptions (evidence-linked)*</td>
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<td>0.22</td>
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<td>-0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Organizational prestige</td>
<td>3.46</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.30</td>
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<td>7. Activist tactics opp. structure</td>
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<td>8. Organizational allies</td>
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<td>9. Financial performance</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
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<td>10. Activist group presence</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.25</td>
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<td>0.40</td>
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<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Disruption-based tactics‡</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Evidence-based tactics‡</td>
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<td>0.24</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These variables represent incidence of adoptions of different types at the end of the study period.
† This variable has been coded to capture whether the focal school had disruption levied against the network-proximal schools at any time during the study period.
‡ These variables represent whether the focal school experienced activist tactics at any time during the study period.

Figure 1. Adoption of supplier sanctions among U.S. colleges and universities.
Table 2. Results of Heterogeneous Diffusion Models Predicting Adoption of Supplier Sanctions (N = 12,828)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
<th>Model 7</th>
<th>Model 8</th>
<th>Model 9</th>
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<td>Propensity</td>
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<td>(0.243)</td>
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<td>0.268</td>
<td>0.254</td>
<td>0.185</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.175**</td>
<td>2.158**</td>
<td>2.135**</td>
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<td>2.155**</td>
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<td>(0.341)</td>
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<td>0.644*</td>
<td>0.588*</td>
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<td>-0.008</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.906**</td>
<td>1.954**</td>
<td>2.032**</td>
<td>2.039**</td>
<td>2.065**</td>
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<td>2.487**</td>
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<td>2.869**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.054*</td>
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<td>0.279**</td>
<td>0.275**</td>
<td>0.278**</td>
<td>0.365**</td>
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<td>(0.109)</td>
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<td>(0.074)</td>
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<td>All prior adoptions†</td>
<td>0.889**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disruption-linked adoptions†</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent adoptions†</td>
<td>0.456*</td>
<td>0.632**</td>
<td>0.618**</td>
<td>0.616**</td>
<td>0.410</td>
<td>0.555**</td>
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<td>(0.210)</td>
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<td>Evidence-linked adoptions†</td>
<td>0.584**</td>
<td>0.814**</td>
<td>0.811**</td>
<td>0.744**</td>
<td>0.808**</td>
<td>0.613*</td>
<td>0.456</td>
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<td>(0.206)</td>
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<td>Consonant commitment ×</td>
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<td>Independent adoptions</td>
<td>0.105*</td>
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<td>Consonant commitment ×</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence-linked adoptions</td>
<td>0.145**</td>
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Variables: *p < .05; **p < .01.

Standard errors are in parentheses. Number of modeled events = 75.

† Time-varying variable.
‡ Prediction values from the first-stage model.
different types of tactics, and models 6 to 10 include susceptibility interaction terms representing the contagion-amplifying role of proximal disruptions and consonant commitments. All models presented in table 2 include an array of controls for organizational size, prestige, and other contextual factors.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that independent sanction adoptions would be more contagious than adoptions associated with disruptive activist tactics. Models 2 to 4 provide information on the significance of each type of prior adoption entered on its own. Model 5 includes coefficients for all three types of prior adoptions. Controlling for the effects of disruptive and evidence-based tactics, we find that independent adoptions are significantly more influential on subsequent practice adoptions. To test H1, we compared the coefficient for independent adoptions and disruption-linked adoptions in model 5. The Wald test is highly significant ($p < .01$), indicating strong support for H1. Each additional prior independent adoption is associated with an 88.1-percent increase ($e^{0.632} = 1.881$) in the hazard of adoption, while additional disruption-linked adoptions do not significantly increase subsequent adoptions. Although the change in goodness of fit across these non-nested models cannot be interpreted directly, adding the evidence-linked adoptions or independent adoptions variables to model 2 yields a significant improvement in goodness of fit ($p < .05$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that sanction adoptions associated with evidence-based tactics would be more contagious than adoptions associated with disruptive tactics. Again using model 5, results show that, controlling for the effects of independent adoptions, the adoptions resulting from evidence-based tactics have a higher contagious influence than adoptions resulting from disruptive tactics. A Wald test to compare the two coefficients for evidence-linked adoptions and disruption-linked adoptions yields strong support ($p < .01$) for H2. As per model 5, each additional evidence-linked prior adoption more than doubles ($e^{0.814} = 2.257$) the hazard of adoption.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b posited that organizational commitments that are consonant with the contentious practice—operationalized by college and university participation in a related private regulatory initiative—would strengthen the contagion effect of independent and evidence-linked adoptions. In model 6, the interaction term for consonant commitment and independent adoptions is not significant, failing to support H3a. But in model 7, the significant interaction term for consonant commitment and evidence-linked adoptions ($p < .05$) provides support for H3b. With each additional evidence-linked adoption, schools that participated in private regulatory initiatives experienced an increase in hazard rate that was 11.07 percent greater than that of non-participant schools. Consistent with our expectations, in models not shown, neither consonant commitment nor proximal disruption produced significant interactions when interacted with disruption-linked adoptions.

Hypotheses 4a and 4b stated that organizations experiencing proximal disruption would experience greater contagion effects from independent and evidence-linked adoptions. Models 8 and 9 of table 2 include additional terms in the susceptibility vector for the interactions of the variables for independent and evidence-linked prior adoptions with the variable for proximal disruption. In model 8, the interaction term of independent adoptions and proximal disruption is not significant, suggesting lack of support for H4a. But in model 9, the interaction between evidence-linked adoptions and proximal adoption is significant ($p < .05$), offering support for H4b.
The results for several control variables are informative. Most importantly, disruption-based tactics and evidence-based tactics both have a direct effect on sanction adoption at schools where they occurred; these variables significantly increased the hazard of adoption by a factor of 7.77 ($e^{2.05}, p < .01$ in model 1) and 11.02 ($e^{2.40}, p < .01$ in model 1), respectively. Note that a coefficient contrast test does not support a significant difference between the magnitudes of these two direct effects of sanction adoption on targeted schools.

The presence of an activist group at a school also independently raised the likelihood of success by a factor of 8.58 ($e^{2.15}, p < .01$ in model 1).

The coefficient on proximal disruption is also important, because it captures the “threat effect” of disruption: the possibility that non-targeted decision makers perceive a risk of disruption spreading to their organizations and decide to incur the costs of adopting the controversial practice preemptively to reduce the chances of becoming the next activist target (Reid and Toffel, 2009; Yue, Rao, and Ingram, 2013). But the coefficient on disruptive protest is not significant across any of the models in table 2, indicating that the threat effect was not affecting sanction adoption among schools.

The variable activist tactic opportunity structure reflects a first-stage model intended to capture organizational factors that increase a school’s chances of becoming a target of activists’ tactical efforts. When entered in the propensity vector, this variable captures the effects of activists’ non-random selection of organizations to deploy their tactical efforts where success is more likely. The same variable when entered in the contagiousness vectors tests whether the selection of schools in which tactics were employed was more influential on non-target organizations’ decisions due to their attributes, such as size and prestige. While activist tactic opportunity structure was not significant in the propensity vector, it was significant in the contagiousness vector ($p < .01$ model 1). Additional details on this first-stage model are provided in the Online Appendix.

Additional Analyses and Results

In additional analyses, we found our results to be robust to the inclusion of several other variables. To address the possibility that selection-bias processes were different for the two types of tactics, we ran two separate first-stage models predicting each separately. We also ran first-stage models predicting the presence of activist groups and consonant commitments by schools. None of these alternative approaches changed our findings. Two additional variables in the propensity vector of our main models, faculty racial diversity (percent white) and dependence on students (tuition as percent of revenues), did not change our results either. We tried interacting the presence of organizational allies and financial performance with activist group presence to reflect a political mediation model of activist influence under favorable conditions (King, 2008), but those interactions were not significant. We also tried coding separate variables for more extreme disruption-based tactics, such as building shutdowns, and found consistent results.

In our diffusion analysis, we also considered several alternative network and social proximity conduits for the spread of sanctions. To do so, we first entered these networks into the social proximity vector of the heterogeneous diffusion model to test whether they help explain diffusion. We tried this for networks...
based on geographical proximity (using U.S. states), intercollegiate consor-
tiums, similar-status schools (using Gourman rankings and Carnegie classifica-
tions), and religious affiliations (using Department of Education codes). None of
these was significant, and each left our substantive findings unchanged. Our
final model specifications shown in table 2 were guided by the recommenda-
tion to strive for parsimony using the heterogeneous diffusion model (Greve,
Strang, and Tuma, 1995).

In additional models not shown, we also tested several other variables in the
susceptibility vector of the heterogeneous diffusion model. Following Briscoe
and Safford (2008), we included heightened susceptibility based on activist
presence. We did not find support, likely because activists in our context
engaged in both disruptive and non-disruptive tactics, muddying the diffusion
signal, whereas disruptive activism was absent from the corporate LGBT rights
context they studied. We also tried interacting all prior adoptions of any type
with proximal disruption and found this was not significant.

We also considered the role of media attention in explaining the success of
the campaign. We first examined newspaper media coverage as a mediator of
tactics and the resulting success. To test mediation, we examined whether dif-
f erent tactics resulted in higher media coverage before the practice adoption
and whether media coverage increased the likelihood of adoption of supplier
sanction at the targeted schools. We also explored the possibility that newspa-
per coverage might explain the diffusion of practice from targets to non-targets.
To test the role of newspapers in diffusion, we examined whether media men-
tions of practice adoptions—either alone or along with information about
tactics—increased the contagiousness of supplier sanctions. There were no
significant effects of media coverage either as a mediator of sanctions at tar-
geted organizations or in the diffusion of sanctions to non-targets. Consistent
with those non-findings for print media, our interviews indicated that electronic
media, including decision-maker listservs, were more important conduits than
print media for influence across schools.

DISCUSSION

This study offers new theory and evidence on how social activist tactics shape
the diffusion of practices in organizational fields. Building on prior research
showing the importance of activist tactics for practice adoption by directly tar-
geted organizations, we found that tactics also crucially affect practice diffusion
in organizational fields by shaping non-target decision makers’ inferences about
the practice’s merits. By viewing social activist tactics as part of the inference
material that shapes interorganizational learning, we developed theory on how
tactics shape the contagiousness of prior practice adoptions and how that
effect increases with greater issue salience among non-target organizations.

In a setting involving the spread of supplier sanctions across colleges and
universities, we found evidence that the contagiousness of prior practice adop-
tions depends on their association with activist tactics. Disruption-linked adop-
tions appear to observers to be taken under coercive pressure, which is not
likely to lead to an inference that rational decision making supports the practice;
consistent with this notion, we found that disruption-linked adoptions are less
contagious than independent adoptions. We also found support for our argu-
ment that adoptions linked to evidence-based tactics avoid being associated
with coercive activism, instead facilitating an inference that the practice has intrinsic merit; evidence-linked adoptions were more contagious than disruption-linked adoptions among non-targeted organizations.

We also found that susceptibility to learning from the past adoptions of a controversial practice varies depending on the extent of an issue’s salience for the focal organization. When organizations take on commitments that are consonant with the practice, by subscribing to a related private regulatory initiative, this naturally increases the issue’s salience. One result is greater susceptibility to the contagious diffusion of evidence-linked adoptions. In addition, when organizations observe proximal disruptive protests related to the practice, they become more susceptible to the contagious diffusion of evidence-linked adoptions. Contrary to our expectations, however, we did not find support for the notion that issue salience increases organizations’ susceptibility to independent adoptions.

Together these findings contribute to an integrated framework for understanding the effects of activism on rationality-based diffusion, based on how activists’ behavior affects decision makers’ inferences about the practice and how an issue’s salience heightens the response of organizational decision makers to those inferences. This rationality-based framework should apply most readily under scope conditions in which the activist movement’s goals do not encroach too strongly on the interests or ideologies of organizations in the targeted field. In such contexts, organizational decision makers will often be uncertain or undecided about the controversial practice being advocated, and hence shaping inferences about the merits of the practice is possible. By way of contrast, in activist campaigns that appear to threaten the fundamental interests or ideologies of targeted organizations, evidence-based diffusion is less likely to be persuasive, and activists may focus on disruption as their means of both mobilizing constituents and influencing organizations.

**Contributions to Interorganizational Learning and Diffusion**

Our findings contribute to research on interorganizational learning and institutional practice diffusion (Davis, 1991; Strang and Soule, 1998; Greve, 2005; Sanders and Tuschke, 2007; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008) by expanding our understanding of how social activism drives adoption. Interorganizational learning and diffusion scholars emphasize that decision makers seek to reduce their uncertainty about the merits of a new practice by learning from the experiences of their peers who have adopted the practice. In this process, inferences about the practice’s merits become entwined with the characteristics of prior adopters, such as their prestige and visibility, that enhance the attractions of the practice in question (Burns and Wholey, 1993; Greve, 2005; Still and Strang, 2009). Our research shows how inferences about a practice’s merits can be influenced by activist tactics, as these tactics become inferential material shaping the behaviors of other organizational decision makers in the field.

More broadly, our research offers a new avenue for studying how stakeholders and other third parties shape practice adoption (Delmas and Toffel, 2004; Eesley and Lenox, 2006; Sanders and Tuschke, 2007) through their effect on inferences about independent decision making. Prior thinking in diffusion theory has tended to focus on how attributes of prior adopters and new practices affect the practice’s contagiousness (Wejnert, 2002; Rogers, 2003).
Our arguments suggest that when third parties become visibly engaged in swaying an organization’s decision-making apparatus, observers will also take note and adjust their inferences about the independent merits of the practice in question (Briscoe and Murphy, 2012; Hiatt and Park, 2013). In addition to social activists, relevant third parties may include partisan interest groups, government regulators, powerful investors, and other organizational stakeholders. Our research suggests that when these actors exert a visible influence over organizational practices, diffusion patterns should shift accordingly.

Researchers studying industry self-regulation and corporate social responsibility behavior may be particularly interested in our finding on the susceptibility of organizations that participate in private regulatory initiatives (Aguilera et al., 2007; Mena and Waeger, 2014). This finding suggests a rather nuanced role for voluntary self-regulation: it can buffer participating organizations against some types of activism or government regulation, but at the same time, participation can heighten susceptibility to ongoing changes in the field. This effect seems to arise because decision makers in participating organizations perceive a need for consistency with their organizations’ consonant commitments.

Contributions to Social Movements in Organizational Fields

This research expands our understanding of how social movements influence organizations, by showing how activist tactics affect diffusion among non-targeted organizations in the wider field that activists aim to influence. On one hand, prior research on activist tactics has focused on their direct effects on targeted organizations (McAdam, 1983; Rojas, 2006; King, 2008). On the other hand, social movement studies of diffusion tend to focus on the diffusion of movement participation rather than on organizational practice diffusion (McAdam, 1983; Andrews and Biggs, 2006; Soule, 2012; Wang and Soule, 2012). Haveman, Rao, and Paruchuri (2007) and Briscoe and Safford (2008) began exploring the link between contention and organizational practice diffusion, but those studies did not consider activist tactics. We expand theory and evidence on how tactics affect organizational practice diffusion, offering a framework based on how tactics shape inferences from prior adoptions and how an issue’s salience heightens susceptibility to those inferences.

By incorporating interorganizational learning into the study of movements in organizational fields, we present a new perspective on the role of evidence and disruption in the activist tactical repertoire. Building on past studies emphasizing disruption as a channel for influencing organizations directly, our examination of diffusion effects demonstrates the importance of non-disruptive adoptions—those that appear in the eyes of organizational decision makers to be free from coercion—as well as the importance of tactics such as victim testimonials that strengthen rather than muddle decision makers’ inferences about the value of the practice on its own.

Taken as a whole, our findings offer a nuanced view of the role of organizational disruption. First, disruption did have a direct, albeit modest, effect on practice adoption at those schools where it occurred. More interestingly, disruptive protests played an important indirect role in diffusion by increasing the salience of the activist issue for decision makers in proximal rival schools. This indirect effect made proximal decision makers more responsive, i.e.,
susceptible, to learning from evidence-linked adoptions; it did not simply increase their chances of adopting in the absence of those non-disruptive adoptions (a threat effect). In a sense, the effect we found is analogous to a radical flank effect, in which the actions of a radical movement organization do not have a direct impact but instead lead decision makers to be more accommodating of moderate movement organizations whose behavior and goals they find more palatable (Haines, 1988). Similarly, it appears that disruptive tactics can lead decision makers to become more favorably responsive to mainstream practice diffusion. This mechanism should operate more readily under the scope conditions we outlined above, when activists’ goals do not conflict entirely with the interests and ideologies of the organizations they aim to influence.

Our study is among the first quantitative investigations into evidence-based tactics. Our findings indicate that the effects of these tactics can be captured via a practice diffusion framework, complementing the existing (mostly qualitative) studies of evidence-based tactics that focus on framing processes and movement mobilization (Snow et al., 1986; Taylor and Van Dyke, 2004; Taylor et al., 2009). For future research on this topic, it might be especially interesting to explore the wider range of organizational responses that can occur in response to evidence-based tactics (cf. McDonnell and King, 2013).

Evidence-based tactics may be particularly relevant to movements that are based inside organizations or that include organizational insiders among their members. Insider movements should have greater insight into the value structure and logic of action in the target organization, suggesting that evidentiary information can be more effectively tailored and timed to persuade decision makers (Creed, Scully, and Austin, 2002; Briscoe, Chin, and Hambrick, 2014). At the same time, because organizational insiders depend on the target for their livelihood, they may be less attracted to the alternative of disruption-based tactics (e.g., Kellogg, 2009).

We expect our findings to apply most readily in contexts in which the activist movement’s goals do not directly encroach on the interests or ideologies of organizations in the field. For example, in our study, the movement’s goals involved supplier changes and labor standards that were not antithetical to schools’ existing policies. Similarly, in the corporate context, recent LGBT activist goals involving same-sex benefits and anti-discrimination protections posed little direct threat to corporate interests (Raeburn, 2004). In contrast, in activist campaigns that threaten the fundamental interests or ideologies of targeted organizations—such as climate activists targeting oil companies, or community activists opposed to big-box retailers—evidence-linked diffusion is unlikely to materialize, and disruptive protests may be one of the only viable ways for activists to influence organizational behavior.

It will be important for future research to determine how our findings based on a single case study, involving one social movement’s campaign in the field of U.S. higher education, may generalize to other settings involving different social movement issues, organizations, and targets. Further, though relatively few disruption-linked adoptions were observed in our research context, future research can examine the tactic–diffusion link in the context of activist campaigns involving greater numbers of disruption-linked adoptions.
It will also be useful for future research to explore the micro mechanisms through which tactics influence directly targeted decision makers and shape the frames through which social issues are understood (Gray, Purdy, and Ansari, 2015). We have only limited information about this from our qualitative interviews; for example, they indicate that the victim testimonials we studied conveyed evidence about social responsibility practices in a manner that made it difficult for decision makers to deny or doubt. Other forms of evidence-based tactics, such as written letters, online postings, documentary films, and scientific reports supporting activist claims (Katzenstein, 1998; Hiatt, Sine, and Tolbert, 2009; Sine and Lee, 2009; Vasi and Walker, 2014), may work via a similar informational mechanism. Of course, irrespective of how the tactic operates to directly affect targeted organizational decision makers, our arguments about diffusion revolve around the fact that tactics that do have a direct effect can then become part of the inferential material that shapes wider practice diffusion.

As social movements pursue change within organizational fields, their actions have both widely recognized direct effects on targeted organizations and less-recognized diffusion effects on other organizations. Our study contributes to research by analyzing the diffusion effects, using the lens of interorganizational diffusion to develop predictions about how different tactics will affect non-targeted organizations. For diffusion researchers, our findings indicate that activist tactics need to be understood as part of the inference material shaping diffusion. Conversely, for social movement researchers, our findings underscore the importance of expanding studies of the tactical repertoire to encompass the spillover effects of tactics on the diffusion process. Finally, the case we studied is itself important because it represents an instance in which relatively large numbers of organizational decision makers altered their market practices to accommodate the social performance concerns initiated by activists.

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