Inside a corporate affairs conference: the race for a social license

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Introduction: A consequence of corporate influence on public policy is the potential for negative impacts on population health. Consequently, it is imperative that public health advocates and scholars stay abreast of emerging corporate practices designed to influence regulatory measures aimed at safeguarding health. To identify these emerging practices, we attended a national corporate affairs conference to identify tactics and gain insights from the range of commercial actors presenting at the event.

Method: An observational design was used for the research. This involved observation of senior executives presenting at a national corporate affairs conference in Australia in 2023. The collected data was inductively and thematically analyzed by the authors.

Results: Our findings revealed that the foremost concern for corporations was maintaining a "social license to operate." Notably, corporate actors perceived social media as a critical threat to social license as it can rapidly sway public opinion against them. Strategies identified for preserving social license included building relationships with the public and civil society, leveraging AI-driven data services to monitor and effectively respond to perceived threats, to convert dissenters into advocates, and applying the narrative of value creation and stakeholder capitalism.

Conclusion: This study contributes valuable insights for public health advocates and scholars by shedding light on the mechanisms employed by corporations to counteract regulatory measures. These mechanisms include using stakeholder capitalist narratives to frame and reframe discussion and debate, engaging dissenters to convert them into advocates, and leveraging partnerships to camouflage actions and build social license halos. It also revealed the unprecedented power and new platforms that previously weak actors now have via social media. The observations from the conference offer a nuanced understanding of corporate strategies, enabling advocates to effectively challenge prevailing narratives that may undermine public health initiatives.

KEYWORDS

commercial determinants of health, corporate affairs, social license, stakeholder capitalism, discursive strategies

1 Introduction

For centuries, commercial entities have tried to influence public policy to ensure it is favorable to them (Barley, 2010; Dalrymple and Fraser, 2019). This is particularly true for corporations, which are characterized by their often large size and the presence of shareholders (Barley, 2010). One consequence of corporate influence on public policy is that it can result in negative impacts on the health of populations, both directly and indirectly (Maani et al., 2022). These practices that impact on the health and equity of populations are known as the commercial determinants of health (CDoH) (Gilmore et al., 2023). Public health researchers interested in understanding the role of corporate influence on health have typically examined the practices or tactics of unhealthy commodities industries, for example, tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed food and beverages. However, there is now recognition that a range of commercial entities, such as the finance and housing sector, the fossil fuel industry and social media companies, may negatively impact health in hidden and indirect ways (Lacy-Nichols et al., 2023).

Corporations from these sectors use myriad tactics to influence both the public and policymakers. Key tactics include political lobbying, providing political donations, the use of "front groups," influencing research, the use of "revolving doors" (the employment movement of politicians, their staff, and bureaucrats between government and industry), the use of marketing strategies, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Mialon, 2020). CSR commonly includes the policies and practices that industries deploy to have a positive influence on society (European Commission, 2021). Although it has also been described as "a tool to deflect attention and whitewash tarnished reputations" (Kickbusch et al., 2016). This concept seems to be superseded now by Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2023). While CSR or ESG are intended to have a positive effect on society, there is considerable evidence of industries using CSR or ESG to increase their growth and profitability by influencing consumption of their products as well as broader public and policy perceptions (O'Hearn et al., 2022; Agarwal et al., 2023).

For many years the tactics employed by corporations have been studied by public health researchers to inform wider efforts to address the CDoH (Mialon, 2020; Lee et al., 2022). However, there are limitations with the focus of this work and the data available. There has been criticism recently that scholars are focused on a siloed approach to the CDoH and because of this they may miss the broader trends and patterns that are universal to corporate actors across domains beyond health (Maani et al., 2020). Further, there are challenges to collecting data in the CDoH field. Much of the data used by researchers is publicly available. These include national databases available such as OpenSecrets (Center for Responsive Politics, n.d.), but also government-held databases such as ministerial diaries, or records of policy submissions. Fewer researchers use primary data gained directly from companies/employees, which may involve observation of marketing techniques, reviewing social media accounts, or interviewing staff who are currently employed or who have resigned from relevant companies. Regardless of whether the data is primary or secondary, a frequent complaint from researchers is that data on many corporate practices is often difficult to access, incomplete and not representative of all practices (Mialon et al., 2015; Lacy-Nichols and Cullerton, 2023).

Data inadequacies mean that it is difficult for public health researchers to get a true indication of how corporations are influencing policy environments. Developing a deeper understanding of corporate practices will enable public health actors to better comprehend, and then challenge the practices used to undermine and block public health policies (Lacy-Nichols et al., 2023). One method that has not been widely utilized to gain insight into corporate practices is to attend corporate conferences, in particular, conferences that focus on "corporate affairs." The role of corporate affairs within a company is varied but often includes internal and external communications, public relations, public policy and government relations (ALVA, 2023). In most large companies, corporate affairs operates at the executive level and they often hold the formal responsibility for determining what qualifies as a social risk for the company, how the company should understand that risk, and how and when it is handled (Kemp and Owen, 2020).

In this study, we attended a national corporate affairs conference featuring a variety of large companies. Our aim was to identify tactics and gain insights from the presentations of these corporations that could be of relevance to the CDoH. Specifically, we wanted to understand what types of strategies industry representatives advocate for when influencing policy debates, whether any of these strategies are new to the public health community, and whether there any commonalities in strategies being suggested by the different industry representatives. By answering these questions, we sought to generate new evidence that will help public health advocates counter corporate narratives that oppose regulatory measures designed to safeguard health.

2 Methods

2.1 Study design

This observational study involved observing presentations of senior executives at a national corporate affairs conference. Participant observation was chosen as the method for this study because other methods of gathering information from elites have proven challenging in terms of both access and quality of data obtained (Li, 2022). Ethics approval with a waiver of consent was granted from the University of Queensland to conduct this research (2023/HE000159). We both registered and attended the conference as paying participants using our real names and institutions. We attended all sessions and participated in discussions with other attendees during the breaks. No information about our role on the research study was made available to the conference organizers or participants in line with our ethics approval.

The approval for waiver of consent was granted on the basis that the privacy of individual actors was maintained and thus the research carried no more than low risk to participants. The benefits of the research to public health through the new insights and knowledge gained, outweigh the risk of not seeking consent. This is particularly important in situations where the power imbalance favors the participants as is the case for senior executives of powerful companies. For these individuals in positions of relative power they are more likely to temper or distort what they tell researchers (Li, 2022). Further, the topics the presenters were covering at the conference were not considered sensitive according to the Australian Research Data

Commons (2022) yet had the ability to provide important insights into the tactics of unhealthy commodities industries and other powerful sectors to influence policymakers and the general public. The design and methods used in this study are consistent with methods that have been used in political science studying campaign behavior (Robbins-Kanter, 2022), in public health monitoring alcohol consumption in bars (Rundle-Thiele, 2009) and in social science to examine workplace practices in transnational corporations (Virtová et al., 2018).

2.2 Participants

This study took place at a two-day national corporate affairs conference held in Australia in 2023. A range of mostly national and some international corporate actors were presenting including alcohol companies, ultra-processed food and drink products sector. However, also in attendance were other companies with significant market power, for example, pharmaceutical companies, resource sector companies, consulting companies and many others. In light of recent research suggesting that public health researchers need to expand their focus when considering harmful commodities (Lacy-Nichols et al., 2023), we focused on all presentations from companies with significant market share ($n = 35$).

2.3 Data collection

During the conference sessions, we independently took notes during each presentation and the question and answer sessions. The topic of each session and the presenter's organization was noted. Key points made by each speaker and the question and answer sessions were documented. As the conference consisted of only keynotes and plenaries we were able to attend all sessions.

Notes were also made of any information that did not fit with the patterns that were developing in the data and noted if certain topics were not covered or if a speaker refused to comment on a relevant issue. We did not ask any questions of the speakers during the question and answer sessions. Where possible, key quotes were captured verbatim. As per ethics approval, no observations outside of conference sessions were recorded.

2.4 Data analysis

Analysis commenced during the note taking process and in the initial discussions between ourselves at the conference during the breaks where emerging codes were discussed. We further developed this each evening as we read through our notes and coded them using the preliminary codes discussed during the conference, in addition to inductively derived codes formed during the reading of the notes. All codes were then discussed the following morning to check interpretations against the data and to ensure consistency of categorization. Where there was disagreement, this was discussed and we determined whether the codes needed to be better defined (Nowell et al., 2017) When the conference recording became available for participants, we could revisit and validate our data when our notes were not sufficient. After coding, we identified and discussed the recurrent themes in the data.

TABLE 1 Companies of conference presenters divided into sectors.

Sector 1	Processed food manufacturer, alcohol manufacturer, alcohol retailer, pharmaceutical company
Sector 2	Weapons manufacturer, building supplies company, waste management company
Sector 3	Media monitoring company, consultancy company, telecommunication company
Sector 4	National sporting association, government department, insurance company

Exemplar quotes were identified to support the interpretations and explanations presented. To maintain the privacy of the conference presenters, the quotes are attributed to presenters from a general sector as outlined in Table 1. Decisions around which sector to place companies in was primarily based on even distribution of quotes to aid anonymity.

As public health researchers who examine the CDoH and often highlight the negative impacts, we were aware that our experiences and opinions may influence our data collection and analysis (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Because of this, and particularly considering the normative nature of this research, we regularly reflected and questioned our bias throughout and after the conference when generating the codes and themes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

3 Results

Several themes were identified from the data. However, the overarching theme that was evident in all conference presentations was the critical importance of maintaining and building a "social license to operate" for each company. A social license to operate was described as a level of acceptance or approval that stakeholders and communities extend to a project, company or industry. It appeared to be the priority for each speaker at the conference and was communicated in many presentations as essential for a company to progress and legitimize their agenda.

To achieve that social license is crucial. (Participant 1, Sector 2)

An organization is only legitimate when it is trusted and meeting societal norms. (Participant 2, Sector 4)

The individual strategies and tactics mentioned by speakers to maintain and build social license were similar and included well-known strategies such as building relationships with the public and policymakers. However, there were new insights that were unfamiliar to us and, by extension, potentially also new and interesting—and relevant—to other public health advocates. These are outlined below.

3.1 Social media as a direct threat to social license

Throughout the conference, speakers repeatedly indicated that their corporation was more concerned about maintaining their social license to operate than regulatory interventions imposed by the government.

Multiple speakers expressed concern about the threat to their companies by the changes driven by rapid digitalization and the rise of social media.

> *Groups on social can completely kill trust and kill our initiatives (Participant 3, Sector 2)*

> *Socials can bring down a brand. In this campaign our brand was getting smashed. (Participant 4, Sector 1)*

Overwhelmingly, speakers communicated that the increase in social media engagement has given unprecedented power and new platforms to previously weak actors, such as public activists. The speakers explained that in this rapidly changing context, the power that traditional media had over public opinion has now shifted to social media actors.

> *There has been a change of the guard in influence – it used to be journalists but now it's influencers. (Participant 5, Sector 3)*

The speakers' statements and the questions asked by the conference participants indicated that corporations perceive this new digital space as vast and powerful and saw social media as a fluid space over which they have limited control.

> *Activist groups on social media are damaging, they can kill you. We've seen that. The opinion can grow and take shape (Participant 2, Sector 4)*

Adding to concerns over social license and the role that social media plays in this, several speakers talked about increasing skepticism of the public toward corporations and that this can be exacerbated in social media. One representative explained that "economic uncertainty, populism, climate change—people find reasons to not trust corporations." It was not just members of the public spreading messages of distrust about companies; some speakers also spoke about how politicians often hurt corporations' reputations for their own political benefit:

> *Politicians chip away trust when they make messages that people should not trust companies so they can build their own reputation. (Participant 2, Sector 4)*

3.2 Commercial strategies to maintain social license

We identified three main strategies that corporations were using to prioritize and protect their social license: (i) building relationships and trust with the public and civil society, (ii) relying on AI-driven data services to monitor threats, and (iii) focusing the narrative on value creation and stakeholder capitalism.

3.2.1 Priority of building relationships and trust with the public and civil society

Multiple speakers emphasized the importance of identifying and assessing threats from social media "activists" complaining about their company, and then engaging with them to de-escalate a potentially reputation-harming situation. Many presentations focused on how to engage and listen to public critics and effectively respond to their concerns to bring them over to the corporation's side. Key strategies to do this included reassuring complainants that the company was listening to their concerns, using stories to convey the human side of the company, and to always be seen as being honest.

Listening and validating the concerns of critics was seen as an important and successful strategy, with several speakers explaining they had moved from a stance of ignoring these critics to the more effective strategy of quickly engaging with them to diffuse a negative situation rapidly.

> *We do not isolate stakeholder groups anymore (Participant 6, Sector 1)*

> *Be present – have a conversation. People want to be able to tell us how they feel and we need to allow that and validate that. One voice can become 100 very quickly. (Participant 7, Sector 2)*

> *We speak to our detractors to understand where their issues are. Hearing their feedback, feeding it back to our engineering team. It's winning hearts and minds. We have these conversations on a regular basis. (Participant 1, Sector 2)*

Other presenters spoke about the success they had with creating platforms for the public to express their opinions directly to the companies. Not only did this make the concerned public "feel heard" (and thereby placated them), it provided the companies with key intelligence on possible future concerns from the public.

> *Activists want to take us on – we try not to go to war with them. Instead we understand what is driving this particular view. We can take that away and have conversations. There is always something you can give. We can change our views. We did not know that, we had never thought about that – activists can then promote this, and your company looks good because you responded to this. (Participant 2, Sector 4)*

One strategy mentioned several times was the identification of civil society organizations that companies knew had the trust of the public and therefore legitimacy. Companies explained that they actively sought to partner with these organizations to harness their trust and legitimacy and continue to grow their social license.

> *Make sure that you surface those stakeholder groups that are aligned to your objectives. When you can find those advocates, they can also form incredible authentic partners - getting across messages which might not get picked up by the media. If you are speaking about yourself or it may be on a journey to building your own sort of experience in an area like ESG where you do not feel confident about your reputation yet, but there are those who already have credibility that can amplify your message and create a halo back to you. (Participant 8, Sector 3)*

Who you decide to partner with is really important in terms of reputation and culture. (Participant 9, Sector 4)

Several speakers explained that establishing partnerships with consumers and civil society organizations is a useful strategy to place pressure on governments to enact more industry-friendly policies.

We need to take action together with the consumers against the government. (Participant 2, Sector 4)

Establishing and promoting the image that your company is honest and transparent was presented as an important strategy not only for building trust in the public but also for engaging effectively with policy stakeholders.

Transparency builds trust. (Participant 10, Sector 2)

We are so good with government because we are honest, and I think that is the absolute key; to be honest, to be transparent, and to actually put forward critical facts which assist them in decision making process. (Participant 11, Sector 1)

Interestingly, only a few speakers specifically mentioned building relationships with politicians and government stakeholders.

There is power in numbers and collaborations – it is so much more powerful if I'm talking to government. (Participant 12, Sector 1)

I turned up to Labor events and engaged with the opposition for over a decade whilst they were in opposition and I have to say they have not forgotten that now they have come into government (Participant 11, Sector 1)

The importance of companies being loyal and supportive within their industry to ensure that the industry social license was maintained was raised by several speakers. They talked about the importance of unity among fellow companies and that the most harmful activity companies can do is weaken each other, because if one company's reputation gets weaker, it impacts negatively on the entire industry.

Do not build your reputation by chipping away at someone else's. This erodes confidence in everyone. (Participant 2, Sector 4)

3.2.2 Artificial intelligence-driven media monitoring and analysis

As mentioned earlier, fear of social media activists was a key focus for all presenters. Representatives of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven media monitoring companies promoted harnessing social media data to monitor reputational threats so companies can proactively and rapidly react to them. This was seen as an easy and relatively inexpensive solution to monitoring and responding rapidly to activist threats while also providing other benefits, including gaining insights into key demographics and allowing them to build relations with these different groups, further increasing their social license.

Every day we are processing all these articles, tweets, Reddit threads, all these TikTok videos and looking at all the different inferences that could impact your company, your brand, your competition, your trust and your customers (Participant 3, Sector 3)

It's important to understand whether your stakeholder groups are supportive or antagonistic, and then understand their legitimacy. What's the relative weighting of each stakeholder. Is the narrative coming from a credible source. If it is not a credible source, is it coming from misinformation. If the detractor is credible – lean into it, if not, rebut. (Participant 8, Sector 3)

Several companies and government agencies spoke of how they had already taken advantage of such data monitoring services to keep abreast of public opinion and respond quickly to dissenters.

We spend a fortune on collecting data in different formats. We use media monitors a lot, we track all the time so we stay up to date. (Participant 4, Sector 1)

We want to invest in real-time data feedback as we can maintain trust by being able to respond. The government is risk averse and not wanting to respond. However, if we do not respond ten comments can turn into 10,000. (Participant 13, Sector 4)

Speakers also revealed that more companies were using social media instead of the mainstream media to distribute their narrative. Rather than waiting for the mainstream media to approach them or respond to their media releases, they were creating their own content and distributing it via their own channels to great effect. Speakers enthusiastically outlined how they had far more engagement with the public and other important stakeholders using this route than the traditional media route. This method also allowed companies to collect and monitor real-time data on the issues and provide insight into those visiting their channels.

Use your own channels to express views clearly – we do not need to go via the media. (Participant 14, Sector 1)

If you are trying to change the narrative…sometimes your own media will be best as it will be picked up by other outlets. (Participant 19, Sector 4)

Mainstream media can be a misleading proxy for public opinion. (Participant 16, Sector 3)

3.2.3 The narrative of value creation: stakeholder capitalism and ESG

Aligned with the focus on social license, almost all conference speakers highlighted the ways their company served society by creating value and supporting social causes, such as sustainability (majority of speakers), First Nations people (majority of speakers), digital inclusiveness particularly of vulnerable populations (e.g., media

company) or access to medicines (e.g., pharmaceutical company). This aligned with a concept the keynote speaker explained was called "stakeholder capitalism."

> *Companies should think how they can create meaningful value for all stakeholders. All of us should be at the center of the process …. Our core products create value for society. (Participant 10, Sector 2)*

> *Stakeholder primacy has overtaken shareholder primacy. (Participant 15, Sector 3)*

It was explained to the audience that commercial benefits were accrued by companies who undertook and promoted their work in ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance).

> *ESG commitments actually drive consumer and employee behavior. Consumers and employers are more likely to buy from or work for an organization that cares about the same issues that they do in each of these [ESG] domains. (Participant 3, Sector 3)*

The power of stories was frequently mentioned by speakers as key to promoting positive perceptions of ESG activities. Through using stories, companies are also able to express their purported values and provide a mechanism to connect with stakeholders.

> *If we succeed in taking these stories to our stakeholders we can bring them along in the change. (Participant 10, Sector 2)*

However, it was acknowledged that stories only go part of the way. A greater challenge in terms of protecting social license was controlling the narrative on negative and positive issues a company might encounter. Corporate affairs units were seen as the "hero" in these scenarios, tasked with quickly changing the story when a company makes a mistake, but also to capture any media-worthy moments to illustrate the value creation they are involved in.

> *In corporate affairs … I feel like we are constantly putting out proverbial fires, needing our own version of superpowers to get through the crisis and issue of the day… we need to be telling the stories of the societal benefits of our products that help our stakeholders stay connected to us as our company evolves (Participant 10, Sector 2)*

> *There is a constant pressure to educate the market, control the narrative and set the narrative (Participant 16, Sector 3)*

For example, one pharmaceutical company representative explained that COVID-19 was a window of opportunity to break out of the untrusted pharma image to a trusted, socially responsible company. "We seized this opportunity and became a success story" stated the representative. She then described how they were able to use storytelling to frame the company as the hero as it had disregarded immense risk and quickly developed a COVID-19 vaccine for the greater good.

> *We found that data did not make a difference regarding engagement whereas emotional storytelling did […] We embedded media along*

for the journey and a documentary film crew. If we succeeded, I wanted to have the narrative captured. (Participant 17, Sector 1)

Common narratives which emerged from the presentations painted corporations as the "victim" when their social license was endangered.

> *News headlines can ruin all the hard work companies are doing. (Participant 3, Sector 3)*

Speakers warned that a corporation's loss of social license placed the public in jeopardy as companies would no longer be able to provide their social benefits. As mentioned previously, the greatest "villains" that endanger corporations' social license were primarily social media activists; very little attention was paid to the government. An exception to this was the narrative of the pharmaceutical companies. For example, one pharmaceutical company framed the government's unnecessary, cumbersome regulations as the greatest barrier to accessing medicines, while the company was portrayed as the hero of the people that was fighting to ensure medicines for all.

As public health researchers, we expected many speakers to mention the value of CSR. However, this concept was only explicitly mentioned once during the conference to say that companies "have moved on from responsibility to materiality" and that this has given rise to the "ESG" concept. Several companies recognized the value of actively engaging in the ESG space to enhance their reputation.

> *[We] engaged in the marriage equality debate as it was good for us. (Participant 2, Sector 4)*

> *If you play in the space, you have the best social license. (Participant 7, Sector 2)*

Although speaking out on ESG issues did not work for all.

> *The marriage equality debate was a debacle for us. (Participant 4, Sector 1)*

There was also acknowledgement from two speakers that the public are more sensitive to a tokenistic reference to ESG and that now companies needed to "prove" they were making a difference in the ESG space.

> *But most people do not believe what you say you are doing about ESG. There is huge public suspicion about corporate ESG claims (Participant 18, Sector 3)*

> *The focus on greenwashing means that stakeholders will want to see data and action behind the words. (Participant 15, Sector 3)*

4 Discussion

By gathering and analyzing primary data from a corporate affairs conference this paper provides valuable insights into the concerns and

priorities of corporations regarding public perception, and the strategies they use to positively influence the public and policymakers. We found that creating and protecting a social license to operate was the key objective for corporations and a common theme across all sectors. The commonly perceived threat to social license was seen to be primarily coming from social media where public opinion could turn rapidly against industry actors. Identified corporate strategies to maintain social license included building relationships with the public and civil society, relying on AI-driven data services to continuously monitor threats, and applying the narrative of value creation and stakeholder capitalism to win over stakeholders.

This study contributes to the CDoH literature by providing primary data on the concerns and strategies of the commercial sector, and expanding the focus from unhealthy commodity industry actors to powerful corporations in general. The evidence on corporate strategies to establish and maintain their social license provides valuable insights for public health researchers and advocates particularly around the area of social media activism and the use of AI to monitor threats and provide insights into key demographics online. These insights might also be valuable for policymakers who are responsible for regulating industry sectors by shedding light on the ways corporate actors aim to shape how they are viewed. The findings may also caution civil society actors to carefully examine existing and future partnerships with industry actors to ensure that expanding their legitimacy to a corporate partner does not advance harmful commercial interests.

The focus on social license was an overarching commonality across the represented industry sectors. Social license is different from an actual regulatory license. While precise rules, authority and mandates define how an actor may operate under a regulatory license, a social license equips its bearer with an intangible, less defined and likely ambiguous permission which may shift under different circumstances. One of the issues with social license is that "the burden of proof seems to lie with stakeholders to show what companies are doing wrong, not with companies to prove what they are doing right, while the absence of community protest may be interpreted as consent" (Boersma, 2020).

Our finding on the rise of stakeholder capitalism as a paradigm defining the new corporate narratives, reflects recent trends reported by business scholars (Hemphill et al., 2021; Freeman and Freeman, 2023). In 2019, the US-based Business Roundtable announced the primacy of stakeholder capitalist principles over shareholder capitalism as the new central driver of corporate governance (Hemphill et al., 2021; Freeman and Freeman, 2023). This was followed by the World Economic Forum 2019 embracing stakeholder capitalism in its manifesto for business (Hemphill et al., 2021; Freeman and Freeman, 2023). Stakeholder capitalism "holds that corporations should support "long-term" value creation rather than maximizing shareholder value at the expense of key stakeholders such as customers, employees, suppliers and communities." (Bailey, 2020). This paradigm replaces *shareholder* capitalism, which has a history of legitimacy in business ethics based on the argument that those supplying critical resources to a corporation should benefit more than those who offer less (such as consumers) (Hemphill et al., 2021).

While stakeholder capitalism has received limited attention in public health literature (McMichael, 2021), political economy literature has undertaken considerable analysis of the concept (Bailey, 2020). It has found that stakeholder capitalism has gained more

prominence in response to corporations' perceived loss of legitimacy due to the crisis of neoliberal, market driven approaches (Bailey, 2020). This resonates with our findings that corporate actors embrace the stakeholder capitalist narrative to protect their social license amidst the increasing threats of digitalization. The stakeholder capitalist narrative encourages both the public and the government to believe that corporate interests are the same as, or are aligned with, public interests. This results in increased trust in corporate actors and decreases suspicion of their activities and products. Persuading policy makers of the equivalency between private and public interest is a familiar corporate strategy used for capturing policymakers (Ayres and Braithwaite, 1991). The few scholars examining stakeholder capitalism in the context of food systems or the CDoH seem to share this skeptical view. For example, McMichael expressed concern that the stakeholder capitalist narrative during the United Nations Food System Summit 2021 enabled agri-food corporate giants to capture the global food system governance agenda (McMichael, 2021).

Another key finding from this study is that companies see social license directly linked to ESG indicators. While CSR remains a popular focus in public health, this appears to be a public relations tool of the past. Our results indicate that corporations now focus on attaining high ESG ratings to highlight their value to society and investors. The CDoH literature has placed limited focus on ESG to date, with only a few studies examining how ESGs are used by corporate actors and how they might shape public opinion and government approaches to business regulation. One reason for this may be that while a variety of ESG reporting frameworks exist, health impacts are not routinely accounted for in these (Robinson et al., 2022). Moreover, ESG reporting is voluntary, and thus, corporations may choose which metrics they report on. For example, ultra-processed food manufacturers rarely report nutrition or obesity data in their ESG metrics, instead they focus on social and environmental indicators (Robinson et al., 2022). This resonates with our observations in the conference that food industry representatives only spoke about environmental sustainability during their presentations and did not mention any health impacts. Indeed, scholars have suggested that ESG will not facilitate better corporate practices in terms of health until there is coherence among commercial, environmental, and health objectives, and specific and mandatory indicators are included in reporting metrics (Robinson et al., 2022; Vineis and Mangone, 2022).

Our findings also demonstrate the importance corporations place on investing in relationships with the public and policymakers often to grow or maintain social license. Corporate efforts to strategically build their constituency is not new for the public health community. However, to date, most attention has been on how corporations frame themselves as an important partner for the government. The food industry provides an example of how corporate actors have taken advantage of the increasing interest in multistakeholder approaches, such as public private partnerships, encouraged by global organizations (Patay et al., 2022). Less evidence is available on corporations' building relationships with the public and civil society outside of the usual CSR initiatives (Li et al., 2014). While much public health literature describes the way the corporate sector vilifies health advocates (Mialon et al., 2015), we witnessed an almost universal strategy among the speakers of engaging with dissenters and listening to their concerns, with the ultimate objective of cultivating them into advocates for the company. This approach aligns with one of the core principles of stakeholder capitalism and was heavily used by

corporations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dyczkowska et al., 2022).

The finding that large corporations are more concerned about "social media activists" over government regulation is a new and interesting finding. While the effectiveness of social media activism has been examined in marketing and communication literature, limited attention has been given to its role in public health literature, particularly as a tool to address the CDoH and change corporate practices (Zoller, 2017). With the rapid surge in social media use, there has been increasing digital communication between stakeholders and corporations (Dyczkowska et al., 2022). This increased public engagement challenges existing power dynamics and could explain the growing apprehension among industry actors toward social media activists (Zoller, 2017). The focus of conference participants on social media as a threat, instead of regulation, may also reflect the already firm grip many companies have on policymakers (Mialon, 2020).

While most in the public health community are aware of the increasing role of AI in various sectors, including corporations, the sophistication of the AI tools used by companies to monitor social media activists and classify them as a threat or not, was of note. The public health community already use AI for disease surveillance, screening, and the integration and analysis of diverse data sources for research purposes (Morgenstern et al., 2021). However, limited attention has been given to understanding the role of AI in tracking public health activism or for monitoring company activities. This will continue to be a growing area of focus for many corporations, and we encourage public health advocates to be cognizant of this practice and to consider employing this strategy themselves for tracking and monitoring corporate practices.

Our findings are particularly interesting when compared to the typologies of commercial non-market activities that influence the public and the government. For example, Lacy-Nichols et al. identifies the following tactics employed by commercial actors: intimidate and vilify critics, attack and undermine legitimacy of science, frame and reframe discussion and debate, camouflage actions, influence the political process, develop corporate alternatives to policies, deploy CSR and partnerships, and regulation and policy avoidance and evasion (Lacy-Nichols et al., 2022). However, our findings suggest that corporate affairs professionals prioritize the "frame and reframe discussion and debate," "camouflage actions," and "deploy CSR and partnerships" as the preferred methods of influence. Interestingly, the other, more aggressive tactics, such as intimidation or attacking science, were not discussed openly as strategies used by the participating commercial actors. Given that the primary theme identified in this study revolved around preserving a social license, the observed findings could be attributed to the reluctance of these commercial actors to publicly acknowledge their use of aggressive methods.

These findings might also be explained by the novel methods undertaken in this study which expand the traditional CDoH methods for data collection, such as observation of marketing techniques, reviewing social media accounts, interviewing commercial employees, or analyses of publicly available documents. The use of participant observation to collect primary data by observing commercial actors interacting with each other, without the pressure to conform to outsiders' expectations provided rich insights not typically captured in other studies examining commercial practices. In particular, the insights into the fears and goals of commercial actors in terms of

securing a social license. Although as noted, participants may have limited their discourse around using more aggressive strategies that could make them appear less worthy of this social license.

Our findings suggests that public health actors can benefit by learning from commercial actors' practices in the following areas. Firstly, we recommend the use of AI-driven data analysis software that can be used to monitor commercial actors' activities. Secondly, investing time in leveraging social media to generate awareness about harmful commercial activities and exert pressure on both industry actors and governments. Thirdly, much success has been achieved in public health through building networks and partnering with like-minded entities. Broadening the scope of potential partners to include less traditional actors with shared interests could enhance the reach of public health activism. However, this should be done with the careful consideration of the interests and activities of the potential partners before engaging with them (Patay et al., 2023; Cullerton et al., 2024). Finally, while this study provides insights into the desire for social license by commercial actors, further research is needed to investigate how social license is perceived by the different industries and more detailed analysis of the tactics used to gain and maintain it.

4.1 Limitations

This study has two limitations. First, data collection relied on written notes that captured speakers' conference presentations. While this initially limited the reliability of the data, after the conference, a recording was made available for registered participants. This enabled us to revisit and confirm the quotes used in our analysis. Second, our personal bias as public health researchers investigating the CDoH might have influenced the rigidity of the analysis. We have mitigated this issue by frequent reflections during the analysis.

5 Conclusion

This paper provides evidence on corporate strategies used to influence public opinion and policymakers. While previous studies have identified various influence strategies, our findings highlight those prioritized by corporate affairs professionals. These include: utilizing a stakeholder capitalist narrative to convince both the public and the government that corporate interests align with public interests; proactively monitoring and engaging with dissenters to cultivate them into advocates for the company; and deploying ESG initiatives and partnerships to camouflage actions and create social license halos. Our findings also offer insights for public health advocates on challenging corporate narratives that aim to counter public health regulation. The findings emphasize that public health researchers and advocates should explore innovative methods to keep up with rapidly evolving corporate strategies influencing policy making. This includes placing more efforts into proactive research using primary data to identify corporate strategies and trends earlier. Furthermore, our research underscores the importance of looking beyond corporate messages and critically investigating corporations' actions, practices and the products they financially benefit from. It also emphasizes the need for caution when considering partnering with the commercial sector as they may be leveraging your legitimacy to create a halo for themselves. Finally, our findings suggest that

public health advocates and scholars may benefit from harnessing the power of social media activism and exploring the use of AI to monitor social media and corporate actors.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee B (2023/HE000159). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/ next of kin because The approval for waiver of consent was granted on the basis that the privacy of individual actors was maintained and thus the research carried no more than low risk to participants. The benefits of the research to public health through the new insights and knowledge gained, outweigh the risk of not seeking consent. This is particularly important in situations where the power imbalance favors the participants as is the case for senior executives of powerful companies. For these individuals in positions of relative power they are more likely to temper or distort what they tell researchers (Li, 2022). Further, the topics the presenters were covering at the conference were not considered sensitive according to the Australian Research Data Commons (2022) yet had the ability to provide important insights into the tactics of unhealthy commodities industries and other powerful sectors to influence policymakers and the general public. The design and methods used in this study are consistent with methods that have been used in political science studying campaign behavior (Robbins-Kanter, 2022), in public health monitoring alcohol consumption in bars (Rundle-Thiele, 2009) and in social science to examine workplace practices in transnational corporations (Virtová et al., 2018).

Author contributions

KC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DP: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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