THE MEGAMARKETING OF MICROFINANCE: DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING AN INDUSTRY AURA OF VIRTUE

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Declarations of interest: none

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"The moment you say microfinance everybody wants to help you."

Muhammad Yunus

1. INTRODUCTION

The taken-for-granted role of business in society has increasingly come into question as businesses face growing pressures to take responsibility for social problems such as climate change, poverty, social injustice, and inequality (Colback, 2020; *New York Times*, 2020; Shamir, 2008*)*. In his recent review of how business is changing, Winston (2020) cites numerous examples of companies responding to the escalating 'calls to reset capitalism' by expanding their definitions of corporate responsibility, raising their ambitions on climate and sustainability, and supporting social justice movements. Social responsibility initiatives are receiving increasing attention and have become a vital component of marketing and branding strategies (Maon et al. 2021). The growing pressures to engage with social problems not only affects individual corporations, but also entire industries. Policy makers, social commentators, and the general public increasingly question whole industries (Bajde, 2019) by asking whether they exacerbate societal problems or offer solutions.

Considering this socio-political climate, the recently revitalized scholarship on megamarketing (Humphreys, 2010a; Kotler, 1986) can play a valuable role in advancing our understanding of how businesses and industries can gain the cooperation and support of various stakeholders and publics required for their development and subsistence. Kotler's (1986) early work on megamarketing focused on corporations' strategic skills and efforts when faced with socio-political barriers to entering and/or operating given markets. More recently, Humphreys and colleagues extended and refined the definition of megamarketing to capture the strategic efforts of industry stakeholders to establish a market or an industry by shaping the pertinent "cognitive, normative, and regulative conditions" (Humphreys et al., 2017, p. 614; Humphreys, 2010a). This stream of work establishes megamarketing as a range of important strategic efforts to develop and sustain an industry or market by gaining the cooperation and support of various stakeholders and publics.

Megamarketing research has relied heavily on legitimacy theorizing (Scott, 1995; Suchman, 1995), a perspective that has proved particularly useful in explaining how contentious industries become acceptable to their environment by establishing consonance with prevailing regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures (Humphreys, 2010a). In contrast, limited attention has been devoted to megamarketing in the context of industries that owe their success not only to establishing various forms of legitimacy, but also, and more importantly, to displaying enduring virtues and commitments to important social goals.

Industries such as microfinance, the focus of our paper, and others such as fair trade or organic agriculture, have secured global attention and support by committing to virtues that break with the taken-for-granted logic of 'business as usual.' In contrast to mainstream banking and the finance industry, the mission of microfinance is to make formal financing options accessible and affordable for poor micro-entrepreneurs, especially in developing world regions. Muhammad Yunus, founder of one of the first microfinance institutions, Grameen Bank, proclaimed that microfinance has the potential to "eliminate poverty" (MacKenzie, 2017). Microfinance grew from a relatively unknown endeavour among non-government organisations in the late 1970s to a multi-billion-dollar industry, serving more than one hundred million clients across the globe (*Convergences*, 2019). In this time, microfinance came to convey a powerful aura of virtue. A virtuous industry is one that proposes to address a societal problem through a commitment to a clear and specific social mission and set of values. We therefore ask: how does megamarketing function in the context of a virtuous industry? What are the key tactics, opportunities, and challenges of virtuous megamarketing?

We argue that legitimacy theorizing is less suitable for addressing these questions. Inspired by organisational theories of virtue ethics, organisational character, and authenticity, we extend megamarketing theory with the concept of industry aura, an elusive 'halo' of unique and authentic virtues that characterise a particular industry. This concept captures the successful discursive expression of virtue characterising a particular industry. We conducted a mixed-method analysis of media discourse on microfinance to illustrate how the industry's aura developed over the past three decades. This analysis revealed specific tactics the industry stakeholders (e.g. managers, experts, celebrities, politicians, commentators) used to build and maintain the industry's aura.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Megamarketing as legitimisation

In her seminal paper, Humphreys (2010a) theorizes megamarketing as a strategic activity to legitimise a market in order to make it socially, culturally, and politically acceptable. Following Scott (1995, 2103), she argues that organisations achieve legitimacy by demonstrating their compliance with laws and regulations (regulatory legitimacy), as well as with the norms and values in the broader social environment (normative legitimacy), and by fitting into existing cognitive and cultural schemas so that the organisation becomes known and accepted by other market actors (cultural-cognitive legitimacy). For example, Humphreys (2010b) shows how the casino industry achieved normative and cultural-cognitive legitimacy by framing gambling as entertainment, drawing parallels to more legitimate forms of recreation, and disassociating casino gambling from crime and vice.

Humphreys' work is valuable for the way it conceptualises megamarketing as a social process and outlines the multifaceted challenges of legitimation faced by emerging industries. However, we argue that approaching megamarketing solely through the lens of legitimacy restricts its theoretical perspective and potential. Based on our review of legitimacy theorizing in marketing research (Huff et al., 2021; Humphreys, 2010a, 2010b; Kates, 2004; Press et al., 2014; Press & Arnould, 2011), and the underlying sociological and institutional theory literature (Suchman, 1995; Scott, 1995; Johnson et al. 2006; Suddaby et al. 2017), we distil three conceptual vectors underpinning this literature. While these vectors do not set absolute limits on how legitimacy and megamarketing can be explored, they nonetheless promote a particular view that obscures the dynamics we seek to capture with the concept of industry aura. First, we outline the conceptual vectors of legitimacy theorizing.

2.2. Vector 1: The external environment as the source of legitimacy

Legitimacy theorizing orients attention to the organisation's external environment as the sum of "the forces that constrain, construct and empower organisational actors" (Suchman 1995, p. 571). Scholars vary in their conceptualisations of an organisation's environment: it is variously defined as external "audiences," as "the larger social framework in which the organisation is nested" (Berger et al. 1998, p. 380); as a "socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995 p. 574), or simply as "environmental context." However, authors are consistent in positing the external environment as the ultimate source, measure, and adjudicator of legitimacy. As Suddaby et al. state (2017, p. 455), the organisation "'gains,' 'acquires,' 'buys,' or even 'wins' legitimacy from its audiences."

2.3 Vector 2: Fit with social order (normality)

In their extensive review, Johnson et al. (2006, p. 57) find that across many definitions, legitimacy is consistently defined as “the construal of a social object as consistent with cultural beliefs, norms, and values that are presumed to be shared by others.” In other words, legitimacy is framed as a matter of accord, consonance, or consistency with the external environment (Kates, 2004; Suddaby et al., 2017), thereby directing attention to the organisation’s capacities to fit “with existing cognitive and cultural schemas” and adhere to the rules, regulations, norms, and values prevalent in its social environment (Humphreys 2010a, p.4). That is, the concept of legitimacy invites researchers to explore how organisations establish and demonstrate their “compliance with a social order” (Johnson et al., 2006, p.55), so that they can be deemed “proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Researchers draw attention to the stability of a certain social world and how it is reinforced across various forms of legitimacy (regulatory, normative, cultural-cognitive) (Press et al., 2014).

2.4 Vector 3: Acceptability

When consonance with the external environment is successfully achieved, the organisation becomes seen as acceptable and appropriate (Kates, 2004). Legitimacy operates as a form of “validity,” a widespread belief that the object of legitimacy is perceived as acceptable and appropriate by others, be it a social group or field enveloping the organisation, or society as a whole (Johnson et al., 2006). When unshaken over longer periods, such acceptability and validity sediment into a kind of normalcy or taken-for-grantedness, the ultimate sign of cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Humphreys, 2010a).

In sum, legitimacy theorizing orients megamarketing research towards the external environment (as the source of legitimacy), towards the importance of organisational ‘fit’ (regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive), and towards acceptability, normalcy and taken-for-grantedness. These conceptual orientations have proved to be particularly useful in exploring megamarketing in the context of industries that struggle to obtain social acceptance due to normative barriers, such as the social concerns and contestations faced by the casino industry (Humphreys, 2010b), the Botox cosmetics industry (Giesler, 2012), the nanotech industry (Thyroff et al., 2018), or the oil industry (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014).

Scholars have rarely applied the legitimacy lens to uncontentious industries. The standout studies of legitimation in the context of community-supported agriculture (CSA) (Press and Arnould 2011) and organic farming (Press et al. 2014) illustrate both the strengths and limitations of legitimacy theorizing. For example, Press and Arnould's (2011) study of CSA uses a legitimacy perspective to explain how a fringe industry gained broad acceptance by aligning itself with a mainstream ideology. Yet the study also indicates that the success of CSA stems from its "moral superiority," as an embodiment of local, small-scale, biodynamic food production (Press and Arnould, 2011, p. 175). This superiority has less to do with legitimacy as regulatory compliance, adherence to mainstream norms, or cultural-cognitive fit, than it does with the industry's success in conveying a set of unique virtues and social commitments that aim above and beyond existing norms and standards.

Put differently, it is important to notice not only the capacity of the emergent CSA industry to resonate with established norms and ideologies (i.e., its moral and cultural-cognitive legitimacy), but equally its capacity to display the virtue of going beyond, and in some respects against, legitimate forms of 'business as usual' (e.g., industrial agriculture in the case of CSA, or high-street banking in the case of microfinance). We will show how an industry like microfinance attracts attention and support by challenging established conventions and championing social commitments that exceed the standard requirements for propriety and acceptability, thereby establishing not only their legitimacy, but also an aura of virtue, or 'industry aura' as we call it. To further develop this line of thinking, we first turn to organisational research on virtue ethics.

2.5 A virtue ethics perspective on megamarketing

Our use of virtue ethics is inspired by organisational research (Weaver, 2006) and the 'old institutionalist' tradition of theorizing (Selznick, 1994; Stinchcombe, 1997; Suddaby et al., 2017). This stream of literature explores the nature of organisational agency and organisational character, as well as the factors and organisational dimensions that may foster or inhibit organisational virtue (MacIntyre, 2007; Nielsen, 2006; Weaver, 2006). Rather than asking whether organisational behaviours and practices live up to existing social norms and values, virtue ethics examines how organisations commit to cultivating virtue and strive for moral 'goodness.'

In this perspective, virtues and moral commitments stem from the organisation's intrinsic identity (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 201). Unwavering commitments to intrinsic values are integral to the organisation's moral character (Selznick, 1994), providing a sense of purpose and substance (Friedland, 2009) and reaffirming that organisations are "at their core, a human endeavor" (Suddaby et al., 2017). Whereas the concept of legitimacy focuses attention on the normative demands of the environment, the concept of virtue ethics emphasizes the intrinsically driven pursuit of 'the good.' For example, Selznick differentiates between organisational character and legitimacy, stressing that commitments to intrinsic values protect an organisation from the "somewhat whimsical demands of the external environment" (Selznick, 1957, p. 40, as cited in Suddaby et al. 2017, p. 291).

Contemporary research in organisational studies examines a variety of conditions and factors that foster or inhibit the development of virtuous character and commitments (e.g. Nielsen, 2006), the role of mutual dependencies in organisational virtue orientation (McLeod et al., 2018), and the challenges of implementing virtue ethics in practice (Fontrodona et al., 2013). Still, this valuable work on organisational virtue focuses on individual organisations, and has therefore yet to explore virtue dynamics at the level of institutional fields, such as industries or markets. What is more, organisational research offers limited insights into megamarketing, and the ways in which industries represent and convey virtue to their audiences.

We take up virtue ethics to argue that social commitments and values can play a central role in how a certain industry comes to represent virtues that set it apart from other industries or institutions. Our interest lies not so much in understanding how an industry can build a distinct identity per se, but rather in exploring megamarketing through the prism of virtue development and delivery (i.e., how virtue is communicated and embodied). The concept of industry aura enables us to theorize the entanglement of industry virtue as an intrinsic quality on the one hand, and industry image or external perception of virtue on the other.

2.6 Industry aura

Before conceptualizing the idea of industry aura in more detail, we first wish to distinguish our use from the popular conception of aura as an aesthetic quality reserved for objects that have not been mass-produced or technologically reproduced (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Heilbrunn, 1998). Such conceptions rest on a narrow reading of Benjamin's work (Hansen, 2008). Instead of limiting the notion of aura to techno-industrial reproducibility, we draw upon what Hansen (2008, p. 340) terms the "anthropological understanding" of aura as "an elusive phenomenal substance, ether, or halo that surrounds a person or object of perception, encapsulating their individuality and authenticity."

We theorize industry aura as a "concept metaphor" (Moore, 2004) whose purpose is to open up spaces for future thinking by nurturing sensibilities towards: 1) the development of unique qualities or virtues that are considered essential to an industry, and that are 2) perceptual-mnemonic, perceptible as an indexical image or trace of the industry's 'essence' (i.e., of its core values and commitments), and as such provide 3) an expression of the industry's authentic moral character. Our conceptualisation of aura also broadly draws from its application in branding research. For instance, Beverland (2005) uses the term aura when referring to the core values that reflect a "personal truth" about the brand. Dion and Arnould (2011) show that a brand's aura can stem from the ideals and aspirations personified by its charismatic creators, while Brown et al. (2002) discuss aura in relation to a brand's heritage as a testament to the enduring qualities and moral character of the brand. Furthermore, branding research has shown that for a brand to convincingly project an aura, it must "appear committed to [intrinsic] values that are above commercial consideration" and other external rewards (Beverland 2005, p. 1008). For example, auratic craft brands convey their "love of the craft" by prioritizing quality and tradition over profit and commercial expansion (Beverland et al., 2008; Hartmann and Ostberg, 2013).

To summarize, inspired by the virtue ethics literature from organisation studies, an anthropological understanding of aura, and references to aura in branding research, we define industry aura as *a widely accepted sense of unique and authentic virtues that characterise a particular industry*. Industries that exude a powerful aura are perceived as being committed to a set of values and ideals that reflect their virtuous character. The dynamic, socially constructed nature of industry aura (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015; Peterson, 2013) means that it can emerge, intensify, or fade away as the discourse and imagery associated with the industry change over time. Just as branding can play a central role in the emergence of brand aura, we argue that megamarketing can play a role in the development of industry aura.

Industry stakeholders vie to shape, and at times contest, auras through public announcements, statements, and debates about industry-related events and practices. This discourse works to uphold or call into question an industry's role in society, its values, and its character.

Public discourse is a central arena in which an industry's aura is constructed, where stakeholders communicate industry values and social commitments that exceed the standard norms of commercial practices and considerations. Similar to megamarketing more broadly (Humphreys, 2010b), diverse stakeholders contribute to aura development. This includes industry members (e.g. key industry players, such as Grameen and Yunus, BRAC, FINCA, ACCION in the case of microfinance), industry-wide associations and initiatives (e.g. the Microfinance Summit), governmental institutions and NGOs (e.g. CGAP, UN, USAID), media, journalists, and other actors that shape the public discourse surrounding an industry (e.g. experts, celebrities, politicians, commentators). In the remainder of this paper, we will investigate how megamarketing functions in the context of a virtuous industry, in order to uncover the key tactics, opportunities, and challenges of virtuous megamarketing.

3. DATA AND METHODS

Megamarketing involves a wide range of public relations activities and strategic efforts to help build and shape an industry's or a market's public image (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). We examine the discourse surrounding microfinance as a window into megamarketing efforts and the development of industry aura. In the first phase of our research, we familiarized ourselves with the history and context of microfinance by consulting a variety of sources from well-known organisations (e.g. Grameen Bank, the UN), highly cited academic research, and top results on internet searches. These sources also include popular books (e.g. Bateman, 2010; Yunus and Jolis, 1998), academic literature (e.g. Copestake et al., 2016; Mader, 2015), websites (e.g. Consultative Group to Assist the Poor, 2020), newspaper articles (e.g. Eaton 1998: "Minor Loans Giving Major Help"), press releases (e.g. Accion, 2005: “ACCION Microloan Portfolio Reaches $1 Billion in 2005”), and documentaries (e.g. Mosher, 2012). (See Appendix A for the complete list of sources.) Based on this preliminary research we provide a summary of the background and context of microfinance (see Appendix B) and timelines of key actors and events to provide a visual overview of the history of microfinance, its global operations, and some of its most important figures and organisations (Appendix C, Figures 1 and 2).

From this familiarisation phase, we determined that the popular news media provided not only a rich source of communications oriented toward projecting a virtuous image of microfinance; it is also a prime medium for critical opinions, debate, and confrontation over the values and practices of the industry (see also Humphreys, 2010a, p. 5). In the second phase, therefore, we carried out a computer-assisted text analysis of news coverage from 1986, when the industry started to attract media attention, to 2016, the year before we created the dataset (Humphreys & Wang, 2018). The aims of this analysis were to determine the amount of news coverage microfinance received over this thirty-year period and to identify major shifts in the tone of news discourse. We selected five English-language newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*) to identify key points in the development of the discourse around microfinance. We choose these news outlets because they: 1) provide an important forum for worldwide debate regarding microfinance; 2) vary in political outlook; 3) represent the views of diverse industry stakeholders and critics; and 4) cover both mainstream and financial press.

First, we identified articles where the main topic was microfinance. Rather than include all articles with one specific keyword in the headline or lead paragraph (Humphreys, 2010a, 2010b), we developed an elaborate set of search strings through an iterative process, validated by calculating “precision” and “recall” (Stryker et al., 2006), as well as by manually scanning and excluding articles that did not deal with microfinance as their main topic. This resulted in 589 articles published between 1986 and 2016. Next, we examined the amount of coverage given to microfinance throughout this time period. As indicated in Figure 1, reporting on the industry increases gradually throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, followed by two consecutive spikes in the mid-2000s and early 2010s. After 2012, the number of articles drops back to a level similar to the late 1990s.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

We then analysed this set of news articles for changes in the tone of discourse. Since microfinance coverage remained very low before 1996, we aggregated the years from 1987 to 1995. We coded the sentiment surrounding microfinance using word lists with positive and negative terms that Loughran and McDonald (2011) developed and validated to measure discourse tone and changes over time. This analysis reveals a rise in positive tone around microfinance in the mid-2000s, a sharp dip at the turn of the decade, and a steady, positive climb from 2010 until 2016 (Figure 2). Combined with insights from the familiarisation phase, we used these indicators to tentatively identify three key periods in the industry's aura development: 1) 1986-1998 as the formative years of industry consolidation; 2) 2005-2007 as the golden years, when microfinance enjoyed a virtuous aura and intense global growth; and 3) 2008-2011 as a period of crises and debate.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

In the third phase, we conducted a thematic analysis of news articles in the database created in the quantitative sampling. Using NVivo, our qualitative text analysis followed an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) in which we generated an initial code list informed by our familiarisation research and theoretical perspective. These codes were designed to capture the character and practices of microfinance as it emerged in the initial period (e.g. 'values' and 'economic development'), as well as the complex blend of industry critiques and attacks that appear in the period of crisis and contestation (e.g. 'unsustainable growth,' 'inefficacy,' and 'value betrayal').

The second round of coding yielded further refinement of thematic codes, and we identified a range of framing techniques that appeared in articles across all three periods. To examine these further, we consulted media frame theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988) and megamarketing literature (Humphreys, 2010b; Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). Discursive framing is a form of coordinated meaning construction (Olausson, 2009), a way of moulding public perceptions by making some aspects of reality more salient than others, sponsoring particular definitions of problems and opportunities, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and/or recommendations of what should be done (Entman, 1993). Our focus on frames allowed us to translate our theoretical question – 'how does an industry develop a virtuous aura?' – into an empirical question: 'how do discursive megamarketing tactics foster the development of industry aura?'

Analysing the use of framing tactics provides insight into changes in discourse over time, and the ways in which social movement organisations instigate these changes to foster support and action (Allen, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988). We identified the core set of themes and megamarketing framing tactics pertaining to industry aura development and debate. We also adjusted and expanded the time periods to better reflect the discursive trends that emerged from this analysis (see Table 1 in Section 4 below). In the next section, we present our refined key periods in the development of the microfinance industry's aura, with corresponding themes and megamarketing tactics: 1) the emergence and establishment of a virtuous industry; 2) commercialisation, scepticism, and debate; and 3) moving beyond crisis.

4. FINDINGS

Our analysis of newspaper articles revealed a discursive trajectory in which the industry's aura was built up in relation to its historical-institutional development (Mader, 2015; Roodman, 2011). The findings are presented within the framework of three overlapping periods, in which distinct megamarketing tactics were deployed to develop, maintain, or protect the industry's aura. The image of microfinance reached its zenith between the late-1990s and mid-2000s. However, its virtuous aura was tarnished and lost by 2011, in the aftermath of industry crises throughout the developing world.

Ultimately, the commercial microfinance industry survived these crises and has performed strongly since 2012 (CGAP, 2018; *Convergences*, 2019). While microfinance is no longer hailed as a 'magic bullet' that can 'put an end to poverty,' the industry retains a social mission to help the poor through the concept of 'financial inclusion.' In Table 1 we identified framing tactics and themes characterising distinctive periods in the evolution of the industry aura: 1) 1986-2007 captures the emergence and rise of microfinance as a virtuous and fast-growing industry; 2) 2008-2012 is a period of crisis and debate as the impact and authenticity of the industry's values and mission come under attack; and 3) 2010-2016 is a period of recovering and re-orienting the industry's diagnosis of poverty and its role in improving the lives of the poor.

[Insert Table 1 here]

4.1 The emergence and establishment of a virtuous industry (1986-2007)

Two types of frames were particularly instrumental in establishing the virtuous aura of the microfinance industry in its formative period: diagnostic and social-mission framing.

By diagnosing the lack of affordable, formal bank credit as an impediment to moving out of poverty, early industry actors – most notably Yunus, ACCION, PRODEM (Mexico), and networks of smaller NGOs supported by the World Bank and the Inter-America Development Fund – identified lack of credit access as an important social problem. Through social-mission framing, pioneering actors positioned microfinance as a viable solution to the diagnosed problem and expressed their commitment to help 'end poverty' through tiny, affordable loans to poor entrepreneurs.

The 1980s was marked by a global debt crisis and recession that forced governments to cut back on social spending and infrastructural investments (United Nations, 2017). In a context of growing disillusionment with state-driven development policy (Rother, 1987, *New York Times*), microfinance emerged as a movement offering a fresh perspective on the age-old problem of poverty. In his book *Jorimon and Others: Faces of Poverty*, Yunus (1982) argues that the poor are locked in a poverty cycle from which even the most entrepreneurial among them struggle to escape if they cannot borrow money to sustain and grow their businesses. This diagnostic frame was reinforced by early newspaper coverage on microcredit:

> Microentrepreneurs – farmers, peddlers, artisans, traders, etc. – are vital contributors to the economic growth of underdeveloped countries and the well-being of their people…Many of these people are hampered by a lack of credit, or credit is available only at an exorbitant cost, which leaves nothing for reinvestment or to raise living standards. (Newgard, 1986, *New York Times*)

> [T]hese businesses do not usually have access to credit from banks and other lending institutions. They often depend on money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates, leaving the entrepreneur in a cycle of poverty. (Christie, 1987, *Washington Post*)

As the argument goes, micro-entrepreneurship is vital to the economic growth of developing economies, and micro-entrepreneurs need credit to grow and sustain their businesses. By the late 1980s, a broad consensus emerged that the lack of affordable credit constitutes a major obstacle to development. For example, Brummer (1995, *The Guardian*) estimated “that there are as many as 500 million micro-entrepreneurs in poor countries who can contribute to development but are unable to do so because of a lack of credit.”

This diagnostic framing also designated a set of core actors whose (in)actions aggravate this problem: 1) the informal moneylenders; and 2) the incumbent banks. Moneylenders are consistently framed as villains who prey on the poor with exorbitant interest rates that drain budding microenterprises (Tyler, 1995, *NYT*), locking micro-entrepreneurs into a destructive cycle of unsustainable debt (Williams, 2006, *WP*). Usurious moneylenders represent the nemesis of the microfinance movement that strives to liberate the poor from the incapacitating cycle of poverty (Yunus, 2007).

Unlike moneylenders, incumbent banks were framed as unsupportive bystanders who have (so far) failed to capitalize on opportunities to support micro-entrepreneurs, in effect driving the poor into the arms of predatory moneylenders (Gibson and Hirshland, 1995, *New York Times*). In his early writing, Yunus refers to banks as potential allies who have yet to realize their true capacity for serving the poor. In the early 1980s, Yunus tried to convince bankers to lend to the poor:

> The banks told me that the poor are not creditworthy. My first reaction was, “How do you know, you have never lent to them?” Perhaps it is the banks which are not people-worthy? (Yunus, 1998)

Out of frustration, Yunus set up his own “people-worthy” bank, the Grameen Bank (Village Bank), to prove to the world that the poor are bankable (Dugger, 1995, *WP*). Like other early microfinance NGOs, Grameen Bank sought to “forge an alliance with mainstream banks” (Gugliotta, 1993, *WP*) in the hope that microcredit and other microfinance services would someday be a part of mainstream banking. As a spokesperson for the US-based Grameen Foundation argued: “The ultimate success […] is not gaining clients but losing them. We lose clients because they don’t need us anymore. They can go to a bank” (Williams, 2006, *WP*). Such diagnostic framing establishes a relationship between competing actors (e.g. microfinance, moneylenders, banks) and the diagnosed problem (poverty caused by lack of credit), and provides "negative definitions" (Clegg et al., 2007, p.507) of what microfinance is *not* (i.e. indifferent to the needs of the poor), and what microfinance *opposes* (i.e. exploitative moneylending), thus framing microfinance as a virtuous entity.

As a corollary to diagnostic framing, social-mission framing attempts to position microfinance as a viable solution to the diagnosed problem and to articulate its virtuous goals. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, pioneering microfinance NGOs defined their raison d'être as a quest to reduce poverty by empowering the poor (Mader, 2015). In this period, microfinance NGOs, such as BRAC, Grameen, ACCION, and FINCA avidly promoted microcredit as an effective tool for fighting poverty by way of empowering the poor through loans, especially "women and minorities, who have traditionally had the toughest time persuading bankers to give them credit" (Applegate, 1993, *WP*). A 1994 *Washington Post* article, suggestively entitled "An Economic Bridge out of Poverty," lauded microcredit through the words of Muhammad Yunus, whom it described as a "successful visionary" and the father of "the most famous micro-credit institution in the world:"

> Poverty, argues Muhammad Yunus, is not created by poor people, but by world economic and social systems that deny them a fair shot. The way to beat poverty is to give poor people access to small amounts of credit so they can start a business.

In short, microcredit can ameliorate the failures of a socio-economic system that is unable to provide opportunities to succeed. The way to "beat poverty" is to give loans to the entrepreneurial poor. The article argues that while "banks reject a particular class of people," microcredit organisations seek to provide inclusive "banking for all" so that everyone can have an opportunity to start a business (Mann, 1994, *WP*).

Throughout the 1990s, microfinance pioneers were increasingly joined in promoting the social value and mission of microfinance by governmental institutions, such as the US Small Business Administration (Saddler, 1990, *WSJ*; Carlson, 1992, *WSJ*), which initiated an

Anti-Poverty Program in 1991 to improve "the capacity of poor people to lift themselves out of poverty" through microloans (Cooper, 1992, *WP*); by transnational organisations, such as the World Bank, whose freshly minted organisation the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) proclaimed that "[f]inancial services to low income entrepreneurs may be the single most effective way to reduce poverty" (CGAP 1995); and by prominent political figures such as Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton, who introduced microcredit to the public with slogans such as "it's called micro but its impact on people is macro" (Hamilton 1995, *WP*).

The social-mission framing of microfinance was further consolidated at the first global meeting of the emergent industry's representatives and supporters: the 1997 Microcredit Summit in Washington, D.C. At the first of what became annual global meetings, and "the industry's main public-relations vehicle" (Pearl 2001, *WSJ*), an industry target was set to reach 100 million people by 2005. This was a very ambitious goal, considering there were only eight million microcredit recipients in 1997 (*New York Times* editorial, 1997). Yunus laid out his vision in his address to the summit:

> This summit declares that credit is more than business [...] This summit is about setting the stage to unleash human creativity and endeavor of the poor […] This summit is about creating a process which will send poverty to the museum […] We'll create a poverty-free world.

In his speech, Yunus repeatedly evokes the collective "we," rallying the emergent microfinance industry under the banner of shared ideals, values, and commitments: an industry that stands at the cusp of a virtuous quest to end poverty.

By the late 1990s, microfinance had gained an aura that enveloped both the practice of microcredit and the institutions comprising the emergent industry. In the media, microcredit was referred to as a tried-and-tested "poverty alleviation strategy" (Friedland, 1997, *WSJ*), and "a movement which has become the world's hot idea for reducing poverty:"

> [M]icrocredit has brought a much-needed revolution in anti-poverty programs. It deserves more than its current 2 percent share of the world's $60 billion development

> budget. Microcredit goes directly to poor people. It creates jobs in villages. It helps women develop confidence and independence. Microcredit can win new political backing for anti-poverty programs abroad that the poor still desperately need. (*New York Times* editorial, 1997)

Microfinance's aura encapsulated its unique mission as a revolutionary, anti-poverty endeavour deserving of substantial support. The veneration of microfinance culminated in 2005-2006. For example, the United Nations declared 2005 "the International Year of Microcredit." As evidenced by the UN Secretary General Kofi Anan's announcement, microfinance was widely accepted as a force for good:

> Microfinance has proved its value, in many countries, as a weapon against poverty and hunger […] With access to microfinance, they [the poor] can earn more, build up assets, and better protect themselves against unexpected set-backs and losses […] In short, they can break the vicious circle of poverty […] Let us use this International Year of Microcredit to put millions of families on the path to prosperity. (UN Secretary-General, 2004)

Kofi Annan's characterisation of microfinance echoes the diagnostic and social-mission framing promoted by industry proponents over the preceding decades, confirming the aura of microfinance as an instrument of social progress set to play a vital role in reaching global development goals. The UN-sponsored International Year of Microcredit not only reaffirmed the virtues of microcredit, but also explicitly framed the efforts to develop the microfinance industry as a virtuous quest to build inclusive financial sectors and achieve global development goals.

The ultimate recognition of the blossoming microfinance industry came in 2006 when Yunus and the Grameen Bank received the Nobel peace prize "for their efforts to create economic and social development from below" (Nobel Peace Prize, 2006). The laureates were honoured for having "developed micro-credit into an ever more important instrument in the struggle against poverty," and being a "liberating force in societies where women in particular have to struggle against repressive social and economic conditions." The Nobel committee concluded its announcement by applauding Yunus' "long-term vision to eliminate poverty in the world," a vision in which "micro-credit must play a major part."

4.2 Commercialisation, scepticism, and the microfinance debate (2008–2013)

From 2006 to 2009, the discourse on microfinance in the news media remained largely positive (see Figure 1, section 3). But from 2008 onwards, a series of adverse events began to cause serious damage to the industry's aura. By 2010, microfinance's aura was noticeably tarnished, as both the authenticity of its social mission and its capacity to achieve it came into question (MacFarquhar, 2010, *NYT*). To account for its diminished aura, industry commentators advanced the argument that it had become too commercialised. By the late 1990s, microfinance NGOs had embarked upon a route of commercialisation to secure private-investor funding (Mader 2015). While often seen as beneficial to industry growth and development (Mapstone 2009, *FT*), and endorsed by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank (Bateman, 2010), commercialisation also caused concern among those who felt that the growing drive for profit jeopardized the social mission of the industry. For instance, in 2008 *The Financial Times* reported on "the battle for the soul of microfinance," an intense debate within the industry regarding the danger commercialisation might pose to the social values and commitments of microfinance. A flashpoint of this debate was the transformations of NGOs into commercial entities:

> Most surprising and controversial are those microfinance institutions that have been transformed from charities to profitable companies through hugely successful initial public offerings. The most notorious, Mexico's Compartamos ("Let's Share"), used a $6m investment to turn itself into a billion-dollar company in less than a decade, expanding rapidly while charging very high rates to borrowers. What was once an idealistic movement is now a fast-growing industry, and one that is rapidly losing its innocence. (Harford, 2008, *FT*)

Key industry spokespeople expressed a similar sense of the industry losing its innocence. Sam Daley-Harris, director of the Microcredit Summit Campaign, warned that the industry "is in great danger of being [about] how well the investors and the microfinance institutions are doing and not about ending poverty" (Malkin, 2008a, *NYT*). Muhammad Yunus compared the profit-driven microfinance organisations exemplified by Compartamos with the predatory moneylenders that microfinance set out to replace (Harford, 2008, *FT*).

The commercialisation debate reached its apex at the turn of the decade when the world's attention was drawn to Andra Pradesh and the Indian microfinance crisis followed by a series of microfinance market meltdowns in countries such as Bolivia, Pakistan, Morocco, and Bosnia (Bateman et al., 2019). The crisis threw a dark shadow over the industry that "was supposed to lift millions of people in India out of poverty," but had instead "fallen into chaos" (Bellman & Chang, 2010, *WSJ*).

The coverage from Andra Pradesh, India, reported a series of suicides arguably caused by over-indebtedness and "heavy-handed debt collection methods" (Bunting, 2010, *The Guardian*). Public anger over abuses resulted in a collective refusal of Pradeshi borrowers to repay their loans and new stringent laws passed by local authorities to restrict how microfinance companies collect from debtors. These events severely diminished the industry's aura, as politicians and other industry observers questioned the effect of the commercialisation on the industry's social mission (Pollgreen and Bajaj, 2010, *NYT*). For instance, reports in *The Guardian* (Bunting, 2010) and the *New York Times* (MacFarquhar, 2010) suggested that the Andra Pradesh crisis had compromised the "star billing" of microfinance, tarnishing the industry's "saintly aura" with charges of exploitation and abuse.

At the same time, popular news articles also expressed doubt about the effects of microcredit, reporting disappointing results of recent impact studies of microcredit programmes. A consensus emerged that microcredit's impact in terms of reducing poverty is much more limited than advertised (Chazan, 2009, *FT*). As succinctly stated by Dean Karlan, a professor of economics at Yale University: "The lesson is simply that it didn't save the world" (MacFarquhar, 2010). The new discourse on the issue of impact was further animated by a documentary entitled *Microdebt*. In an interview with *The Guardian* (Bunting, 2011a), the film's creator, Tom Heinemann, recounted asking experts whether there was evidence that microfinancing reduced poverty, and receiving mixed answers: "Several say there is no real impact or that we need more research to know. At the same time, I could see loads of websites of aid agencies claiming huge success […] The more I talked to people, the more astonished I was at the mass hype." According to *The Guardian*, Heinemann's documentary provided "a sober reckoning" (Bunting, 2011c), a long overdue "reality check" for an industry that for over a decade had been "hyped as a magic solution to poverty" (Bunting, 2011a).

Industry actors deployed various megamarketing tactics to contain the critiques and defend the moral character of microfinance. For example, they used the legitimation tactic of segregation (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014) to insulate the industry from the deviant behaviour of a few 'rogue' microlenders. These lenders were denounced for tarnishing the reputation of the industry by overselling microcredit, charging exorbitant interest rates, and using abusive collection tactics (Malkin, 2008a, *NYT*; Bellman & Chang, 2010, *WSJ;* Burke, 2011, *The Guardian*; Bunting, 2011a, *The Guardian*). The industry sought to restore its aura and legitimacy by introducing and advertising self-regulatory measures (e.g. industry-wide guidelines and codes of conduct, client protection principles, and standards) and efforts to improve transparency (Malkin, 2008b, *NYT*; Schlein, 2011, *NYT*). Whereas these containment tactics received broad endorsement from microfinance industry members, there was less consensus on how to respond to charges of value and mission betrayal provoked by the intensified commercialisation of microfinance.

Led by Yunus, the "traditionalist" camp (Harford, 2008, *FT*) insisted that the industry must stay true to the social commitments and values that had been central to microfinance's aura in the past – a tactic we term ‘virtue anchoring.’ In his 2011 New York Times op-ed, Yunus lamented that: “Commercialisation has been a terrible wrong turn for microfinance […] a worrying ‘mission drift’ in the motivation of those lending to the poor.” In his view, “credit programs that seek to profit from the suffering of the poor should not be described as ‘microcredit,’ and investors who own such programs should not be allowed to benefit from the trust and respect that microcredit banks have rightly earned” (Yunus, 2007). Traditionalists sought to anchor the industry in its virtuous legacy, one that has been betrayed by those who prioritize profit over its original values and commitments.

At the same time, Yunus also condemned Compartamos and other microfinance organisations that prioritize profit over the industry’s social mission:

> You are on the moneylender’s side. Because your aim is the moneylender’s aim. Your thinking is the moneylender’s thinking. So, I don’t want to associate with you, I want to battle with you and to fight you. (Yunus, quoted in Harford, 2008, *FT*)

In this passage Yunus deploys “characterisation framing” (Shmueli et al., 2006), i.e. he ascribes reductive characteristics (“moneylender aims,” “moneylender thinking”) to a group of organisations to underscore the gross violation of the virtuous legacy of microfinance perpetrated by the “moneylenders.”

In contrast, the proponents of commercialisation rejected the traditionalists’ arguments against profit-seeking (Johnson, 2012, *FT*), and argued instead that profit and commercialisation were essential if the industry were to fulfil its mission:

> “The only place you can get the amount of money that is needed to help the poor is in the capital markets,” Vikram Akula, founder and chairman of SKS, said in an interview. “That’s why we are doing this IPO.” (Bellman 2010, *WSJ*)

In this quote, Akula attempts to establish a link between commercialisation and the industry’s mission to reach the billions who still “lack access to basic financial services.” This is an example of frame-bridging tactics (Snow et al., 1986) designed to portray commercialisation and the pursuit of profit as necessary for achieving institutional sustainability and expanding industry services to poor populations, and therefore crucial to the industry's social mission:

> No one has done more to inspire microfinance globally than the Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, but when he condemns commercial microfinance, I believe that he is making a mistake […] He takes pride in the industry's achievement in reaching 100 million poor clients, but does not acknowledge that commercialisation is precisely how much of that goal was achieved. (Schlein, 2011, *NYT*)

Neither the traditionalists nor proponents of commercialisation offered strong arguments against the scathing charge that microcredit does little to reduce poverty, a charge that strikes at the heart of microfinance's social mission. Yet, even as researchers pointed out the limited benefits of microcredit, they also provided helpful insights for re-orienting microfinance activities towards services that experts agreed the poor need most (Aguirre, 2011, *NYT*; van Vark, 2013, *The Guardian*). These include formal savings, insurance, and money-transfer services that the unbanked poor are currently unable to access:

> While Roodman insists financial services are no likelier to 'lift' people out of poverty than clean water or electricity, he argues that the thriving microfinance industry can still deliver crucial services to millions in need of better ways to manage their money. (Provost, 2012, *The Guardian*)

4.3 Moving beyond crisis: From 'eradicating poverty' to 'financial inclusion' (2010-2016)

News discourses in the aftermath of the crises and debate were largely characterized by a return to industry mission framing and diagnostic framing tactics. Heralding microfinance's new mission, reporting on the industry from 2010 to 2016 overwhelmingly focuses on savings, insurance, and various forms of capacity-building programmes for clients. As executive director D'Onofrio of the SEEP network explained: "Not everyone is an entrepreneur […] Not everyone needs a loan, but everybody needs to save" (Mui, 2013, *WP*). The following quote also illustrates the tone of the reporting on microfinance's expanded scope of services:

> Given the conditions in slums, a home can be an important asset for women who have little else […] Habitat for Humanity’s ground-breaking work in housing microfinance is opening up access for hard-working people who had been shut out of formal banking systems. (Rothwell, 2015, *The Guardian*)

The new focus on expanded services also signalled a significant shift in the industry’s mission, from reducing poverty to improving the lives of the poor through financial inclusion:

> There is still a dire need for responsible finance to ensure clients are treated fairly, receive education along with financial products and are given options to recover when things don’t go as planned. An organisation that has sustainability and making a social impact built into its DNA is best suited to do this. (Andrée Simon, co-CEO of FINCA Microfinance, in an interview with Orton, 2016, *WP*)

This new mission was also a bid to re-establish the moral values and virtuous character of the thriving microfinance industry in the eyes of the general public and its stakeholders. The discourse surrounding financial inclusion presents access to formal banking services as a human right. Therefore, the goal of providing banking services to the “financially excluded” or “the unbanked poor” is a noble pursuit for social justice (Mader & Sabrow, 2019).

To justify this shift in social mission, the plight of the poor also needed a new diagnosis. Industry documents as well as news articles appeared throughout this period explaining the urgent need to bring the “financially excluded” into the fold. In 2013, CGAP published a five-year strategy document for 2014-2018 entitled “Advancing Financial Inclusion to Improve the Lives of the Poor.” The document lays out why the poor need access to formal banking services, arguing that “more than 75 percent of the world’s poor are excluded from formal financial services,” and that financial exclusion “imposes large opportunity costs on those who most need opportunity” (CGAP, 2013, p. 2).

News articles showcasing the financial inclusion and wellbeing initiatives of microfinance institutions framed them as sincere efforts to do social good, as exemplified in this paid content appearing in *The Guardian*:

> What makes Itaú Microcrédito different is that the program approaches clients within their communities […] Inclusion is at the heart of Itaú's approach […] microfinance is an effective tool for economic and social inclusion, which in turn contributes to Brazil's economic and social development (McCollough, 2015).

However, even with cohesive efforts from various microfinance representatives to re-diagnose the needs of the poor and reframe the industry's social mission, journalists and other microfinance commentators continued to remind readers that the industry failed to live up to its previous social mission. For example, in two separate articles for *The Guardian*, Bunting explicitly acknowledges the shift in framing the industry's mission: "There have been attempts in recent years to clarify the key principles of microfinance" (2010). She later questions: "Has [the microfinance industry's] focus shifted from helping the poor to financial inclusion – a subtle but crucial difference?" (2011). Even more directly, several articles continue to mention microfinance's fall from grace. For example:

> […] Muhummad Yunus hoped to create a virtuous circle that eventually would lift borrowers out of poverty […] but the global recession showed that when the virtuous circle breaks down, the outcome can be disastrous. (Mui, 2013, *WP*)

> What Scofield calls the "golden age" of microfinance in clearly over, and the rose-tinted view of its impact on development has dimmed. (Chonghaile, 2014, *The Guardian*)

> The time when microfinance was seen as the miracle cure to lift people out of poverty is long gone. (Tremolet and Mansour, 2015, *The Guardian*)

Interestingly, these reminders of microfinance's past failure appear in articles that re-frame the industry's social mission. The first quote cited above is from an article introducing readers to new micro-savings around the world; the second is from a piece discussing how the industry is harnessing sophisticated technologies to improve services; and the third is from an article about increasing sanitation coverage through microfinance. Acknowledging its previous mistakes and the pitfalls of mission drift works as both atonement and reassurance that "lessons have been learned" and that the industry is "reformed" (Kazmin, 2014, *FT*).

A concerted effort to renew the social-mission framing appears in this last period, in which many articles portray microfinance's new mission as a virtuous pursuit of social inclusion and a renewed focus on empowerment. For example, one article reports that a trial for a microfinance programme "showed a 55 percent reduction" in reports of gender violence in rural South Africa (Ellsberg, 2015, *WP*). Another describes the excitement at a microfinance roundtable discussion about "the prospect of real social change among disempowered people" (van Vark, 2012, *The Guardian*). Ultimately, however, the persistent reminders of past mistakes prevent the industry's aura from returning to its previous status. Evidence of a fully restored aura would include news articles describing a consensus among a variety of stakeholders offering unmitigated praise of microfinance, as we saw in the formative period (1986-2007). However, there are too few articles that provide enough of the image-building content and framing tactics for the industry to once again project a virtuous aura.

5. DISCUSSION

Our study complements existing work on megamarketing as legitimation by introducing the concept of industry aura. This concept shifts attention from how an industry can secure acceptance by conforming to the external environment (regulatory, normative, cultural-cognitive), towards how an industry develops an aura of virtues that surpass the minimal standards of appropriateness and "normality" (Suddaby et al., 2017). The concept of industry aura enables us to elucidate how the microfinance industry came to represent an authentic commitment to a social mission of alleviating a pressing social problem.

While previous studies explore market forms and industries that struggle to convince social actors of their propriety and acceptability (Giesler, 2012; Humphreys, 2010b; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014), we explore megamarketing in the context of an industry that has developed an aura of virtue as a ground-breaking force for societal good (i.e. social development and empowerment of the poor). Our study explains how a wide range of actors contribute to the development and maintenance of industry aura via assorted discursive tactics, many of which have not been yet recognised in existing megamarketing literature.

First, we identify tactics of diagnostic and mission framing, through which key actors frame societal problems in a particular way and then position the industry as offering solutions via its virtuous social mission. Our study extends Giesler's (2012) work on 'problematisation' in the context of brand-image contestation. Giesler shows how Botox Cosmetics marketers redefine a particular actor's problem to make themselves and their product seem indispensable to the problem's solution. We advance this work by illuminating diagnostic framing as a megamarketing tactic to enhance an industry's image by diagnosing broader social problems and envisioning their alleviation through industry development. We demonstrate that megamarketers use diagnostic framing not only in response to industry contestation, but also in order to launch an industry and position it in relation to competing actors. As we have shown, advocates used diagnostic framing to position microfinance against predatory moneylenders, disinterested commercial banking, and ineffectual charities.

Second, our focus on industry aura highlights problems of moral authenticity that fall outside the scope of legitimacy theorizing (see Suddaby et al., 2017) and have yet to be discussed in megamarketing research. Standout studies of organic and community-supported agriculture (CSA) have begun to open the megamarketing literature to industries that project "moral superiority" (Press and Arnould, 2011; see also Press et al., 2014). However, these studies do not explore how megamarketers deal with challenges to the authenticity of CSA's values and commitments. Our work indicates that to retain its virtuous aura, an industry needs to demonstrate, consistently and constantly, the authenticity of its social commitments and values. To obtain normative and regulatory legitimacy, an industry does not need to demonstrate that its compliance with social norms and regulations derives from an authentic commitment to the values underpinning norms and regulations. This is not to say that industries hampered by legitimacy problems do not encounter issues of authenticity; for example, many have questioned the sincerity of the casino industry's efforts to fight gambling addiction (Humphreys, 2010a, 2010b). However, the pressure to demonstrate an authentic commitment to a social mission is not as salient as it is in the case of an industry that exudes an aura of virtue. In other words, virtuous industries face distinct, and likely more pronounced, challenges to their moral authenticity.

In addition to diagnostic and social-mission framing, we show how certain stakeholders deploy the megamarketing tactic of virtue anchoring to reclaim the microfinance industry's tarnished aura. By re-anchoring the industry in the bedrock of its formative values and commitments, megamarketers not only sought to safeguard the legitimacy of microfinance as a trustworthy industry; they also strived to rekindle the "saintly aura" (MacFarquhar, 2010) eroded by the industry's continual commercialisation and faltering performance in alleviating poverty.

In sum, our study of industry aura complements legitimacy theories and expands the perspective and explanatory power of megamarketing beyond acceptance in the external environment (an outside-in orientation) with an 'inside-out' view. Specifically, we believe the concept of industry aura is more useful for examining industries actively pursuing a mission of social good because it helps to: 1) understand the pursuit of virtuous social missions as rising above external social norms; 2) examine the relationship between industry values and commitments to outward-facing orientations and proposed problem-solving; and 3) examine how an industry communicates and projects its virtues and authenticity to the surrounding environment (via diagnostic and social-mission framing tactics). Table 2 below summarises how industry aura complements the core conceptual vectors of legitimacy in megamarketing.

[Insert Table 2 here]

5.1 Transferability to other industry contexts

To demonstrate the transferability of our work, we apply the industry-aura perspective to CSA. Like microfinance, CSA is a virtuous market form and has been the subject of several socio-cultural marketing studies (Press & Arnould, 2011; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007a, 2007b). CSA also developed an aura as a social movement coalescing around a blend of traditional and countercultural virtues of environmental sustainability and support for local farmers and communities. Existing research views CSA's deep-rooted pastoral values and ideals in terms of legitimation as an "acceptable market form" (Press and Arnould, 2011, p. 175). Along similar lines, one could argue that the rise of microfinance as a legitimate industry was fuelled by its capacity to embody neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and market-driven progress. Microfinance no doubt benefited from the neoliberal moralistic regime that has over the past decades increasingly shifted responsibility for social problems to individuals and corporations (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014).

However, through the theoretical lens of industry aura, we discuss not only how resonance with prevalent ideology garners legitimacy, but just as importantly how becoming an avant-garde bearer of ideological values and commitments (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Koch, 2020) can help develop a unique, virtuous aura for an industry through megamarketing tactics. In other words, the industry aura lens complements previous work on legitimation by opening avenues for the exploration of megamarketing for industries such as microfinance or CSA beyond legitimacy and legitimation.

More specifically, our work can stimulate the exploration of how diagnostic and social-mission framing were used to cultivate the aura of CSA, as well as an examination of challenges to CSA's authenticity as a virtuous industry. Like microfinance, CSA's commitment to supporting local framers and local produce became compromised by the pursuit of commercial success (Moskin, 2016). While the megamarketing dynamics surrounding these tensions have yet to be comprehensively studied, the tactics outlined in this paper provide a useful tool for examining any potentially virtuous industry with explicit goals of societal improvement, such as electric vehicles, renewable energy, or the tiny home industry (Tiny Home Industry Association, 2019; Mangold and Zschau, 2019).

5.2 Third-sector actors as aura validators and amplifiers

The comparison between microfinance and other virtuous industries, such as Fairtrade, raises further questions regarding the role of non-profit and development organisations in megamarketing and market creation. While these market actors have so far received limited attention in the megamarketing literature, their role in market creation can be significant (Teegen et al., 2004). As pointed out by Yngfalk and Yngfalk (2020) non-profit organizations represent a major part of the global economy, yet their role in market system dynamics has not been sufficiently explored by marketing research. In their analysis of *Friskis&Svettis*, a Swedish non-profit chain of fitness centres, Yngfalk and Yngfalk show how non-profit organisations shape the market by "constructing an institutional infrastructure of ethical multiplicity" (2020, p. 357), allowing for the reproduction and enmeshment of diverse values and interests (e.g., moral, political, commercial). A similar interplay of moral, political and commercial elements is also evident in the case of Fairtrade, an industry that began as a movement dedicated to fairly compensating farmers of coffee and similar produce (e.g. cocoa) in developing regions, and to ensuring a more just articulation of the commodity chain (Golding & Peattie, 2005; Low & Davenport, 2006). Nongovernmental organisations, development agencies, and transnational institutions played key roles in initiating industry development in the context of microfinance, CSA, and Fairtrade. Fairtrade's transition from a social-justice movement to a widely adopted value chain stems from the efforts of alternative trade organisations, religious mission-driven NGOs, non-profit labelling organisations, national and international development agencies, as well as the efforts of transnational bodies such as the United Nation's Conference on Trade and Development (Fridell, 2004).

As our study shows, governmental organisations, NGOs, and trans-governmental institutions (e.g., United Nations) contributed heavily to the megamarketing of the microfinance industry. NGOs and cooperatives like Grameen Bank were well-positioned to point out social and economic problems and garner support for the virtuous mission of microfinance. An NGO is an established institutional form marked by its devotion to a social mission over commercial concerns (Dart, 2004). In addition to helping strengthen the normative legitimacy of the emergent market and industry (Yngfalk and Yngfalk 2020), NGOs can also play a key role in developing a virtuous industry aura. However, for the microfinance industry to be able to live up to its neoliberal ideals of market-driven development, entrepreneurialism, and self-sustainability (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), the initially NGO-dominated industry gradually transitioned towards social enterprise and for-profit commerce. The notorious profits (e.g. the infamous IPO of Compartamos) and severe debt crises (e.g. Andra Pradesh) associated with this transition exposed the microfinance industry to a series of authenticity contestations, ultimately weakening the industry's aura. The transformation of NGOs into stock-exchange-listed, commercial banks became a symbol of microfinance's fall from grace.

Influential global organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Nobel Prize Committee contributed to the industry's aura through public recognition and admiration of microfinance for a global audience. These organisations not only drew the attention of a public audience to the virtues of microfinance; they also helped authenticate and amplify the virtues of microfinance at the turn of the century. In the aftermath of microfinance's authenticity crises, global powerbrokers have been much less vocal in their support of the industry. However, the re-orientation of microfinance's megamarketing towards financial inclusion as a social cause continues to receive considerable support from institutions such as the UN (Mader & Sabrow, 2019). Future research can more closely examine the roles of such transnational power brokers in megamarketing, both from the perspective of industry legitimacy and industry aura.

5.3 The role of key industry personas in megamarketing

Our study indicates that key industry personas can play a central role in megamarketing, particularly when it comes to developing and maintaining industry aura. Muhammad Yunus was integral in the development of the microfinance's aura as the central figure who personified the virtues and visions of the industry. Building on Stern's (1988) and Dion & Arnould's (2016) work on commercial personas, we argue that key industry personas provide a set of qualities through which stakeholders and audiences can relate to the industry. For decades, Yunus personified an ethos of compassion and respect for the poor, extolling their capacity for self-reliance and entrepreneurship (Bornstein, 2017). He embodied and dramatized the virtues of microfinance as a tool of empowerment through books, articles, interviews, and public talks that had a significant impact on political and economic elites, industry stakeholders, as well as the broader public. The globally mythologized 'father of microfinance' was an industry champion who "lead[s] from conviction in pursuit of a value-based mission or cause […] driven by deeply rooted values" (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), p. 397). As such, he also functioned as a conduit through which recognition and praise for the virtues of microfinance were channelled, helping to consolidate the industry's aura. For example, the Nobel Peace Prize received by Yunus and Grameen Bank drew massive media attention and intensified microfinance's aura as a virtuous industry.

In addition to catalysing and intensifying microfinance's aura, Yunus also contributed to the vulnerability of the industry's aura. The scandals surrounding debt collection and pressure techniques among some microfinance institutions, combined with Yunus' political opposition efforts in 2007, prompted the Bangladesh government to attack Yunus' integrity, with the prime minister Sheikh Hasina famously calling him a "blood-sucker" (Al-Mahmood, 2013). These moves exacerbated microfinance's global crisis and added weight to the mounting critiques of microfinance's authenticity as a virtuous industry (Burke, 2011a). While Yunus was later cleared of the accusations of financial wrongdoing, he was nonetheless forced to step down as the managing director of Grameen Bank. The stains caused by the politically motivated attacks on Yunus could not be erased from the microfinance industry in general, despite the considerable international support and campaigning on his behalf (Burke, 2011b). In other, similarly virtuous industries, we observe that some enjoy the benefits and risks of being a central industry persona (e.g. Elon Musk for electric vehicles and renewable energy), while others do not have a prominent representative or spokesperson (e.g. CSA and Fairtrade). Future research on industry aura and megamarketing should examine the role of key industry representatives more closely.

5.4 Managerial implications

In a recently published newsletter, *The New York Times Magazine* marked the fiftieth anniversary of Milton Friedman's infamous essay, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits" (Friedman, 1970), by asking twenty prominent CEOs, Nobel laureates, and other leading scholars to reconsider Friedman's doctrine. The responses show that it has become increasingly difficult to conceive of business solely in terms of economic ends and profit generation. As also argued by megamarketing researchers, market and industry creation is best viewed as a social process that requires the cooperation of multiple stakeholders (Humphreys, 2010a; Kotler, 1986), whose interests and expectations cannot be reduced to those of the shareholders. This line of research has alerted managers to the challenges of securing legitimacy in complex social and political contexts. To obtain and maintain their legitimacy, businesses have to not only avoid financial ruin but just as importantly eschew regulatory, normative, and cultural "bankruptcy."

Supplementing existing megamarketing research, our analysis turns managerial attention towards an industry that not only obtained legitimacy but has also raised the socio-normative bar above existing standards, cultivating and projecting enduring virtues and commitments to social causes. The aura of virtue became an important asset of microfinance, securing the support of donors, investors, governmental and non-governmental organisations, volunteers, as well as the public at large. This support was instrumental in developing an institutional foundation and establishing the industry's global presence. In other words, an industry aura can serve as a vital, intangible asset benefitting industry stakeholders.

While these assets cannot simply be created or fully controlled by a single organisation, our research can help organisations become better attuned to the processes of industry-aura development and understand how to contribute to the cultivation of industry aura. As indicated in Table 3, the framing tactics identified here can help managers navigate the emergence of an industry's aura, as well as the conditions in which the aura of a more mature industry becomes contested.

[Insert Table 3 here]

One of the central managerial implications of our work is identifying the importance of authenticity in megamarketing. As discussed in the theoretical background above, an industry aura is built upon expressions of an authentic commitment to a virtuous social mission. A prominent aura makes the industry and its members vulnerable to critiques and attacks if relevant outsiders perceive the industry's actions as inauthentic; that is, if an industry representative appears to betray the professed values or fall short of contributing to the solution of targeted social problems. Stakeholders and commentators will hold member organisations to the industry's self-imposed higher standards and virtues. It is thus important for organisations to monitor and detect authenticity contestations, and to take advantage of mitigation tactics such as virtue anchoring and segregation framing.

Finally, the case of microfinance indicates that partnerships with, or incorporation of, governmental and public-sector organisations oriented towards shared social goals and values can help an industry strengthen its aura. The strong presence of NGOs not only helped cultivate microfinance's aura; it also contributed to its authenticity crisis. The success of the industry motivated several NGOs to become commercial entities, in turn raising doubts about microfinance's commitment to helping the poor. Microfinance's emergence as a virtuous industry, and its later authenticity crisis, were deeply marked by key industry players such as Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank and the infamous Compartamos, which became powerful symbols of the industry's virtue and its inauthenticity, respectively.

It is thus important for managers to consider who the key industry players are at any given point, and how their actions might affect the industry's aura. Virtue anchoring can help organisations to cultivate and maintain the industry's aura by strengthening its links to central organisations and personas that embody compelling virtues, while segregation framing distances the industry from those who might erode the industry's aura. In sum, the framework of industry aura can complement stakeholders' efforts to ensure industry legitimisation by identifying megamarketing tactics that are relevant to establishing the industry as a virtuous entity, and to defend the authenticity of its social commitments.

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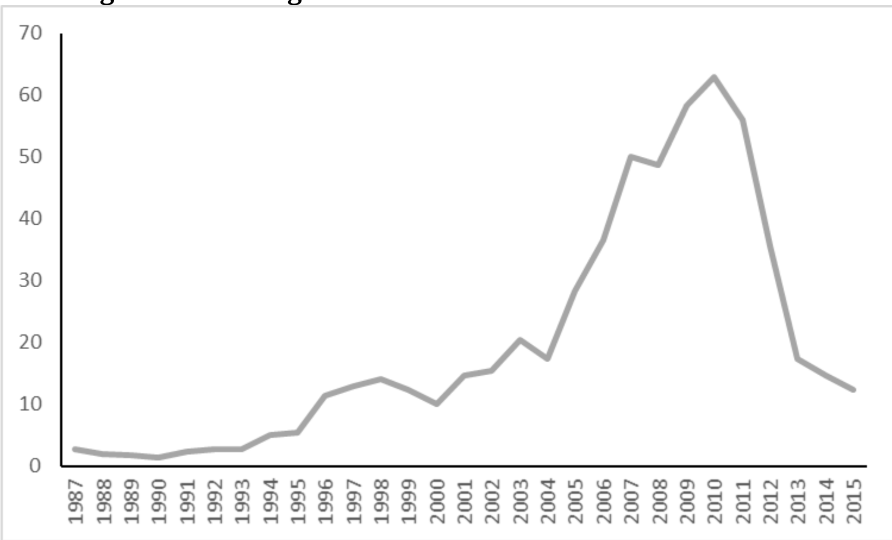
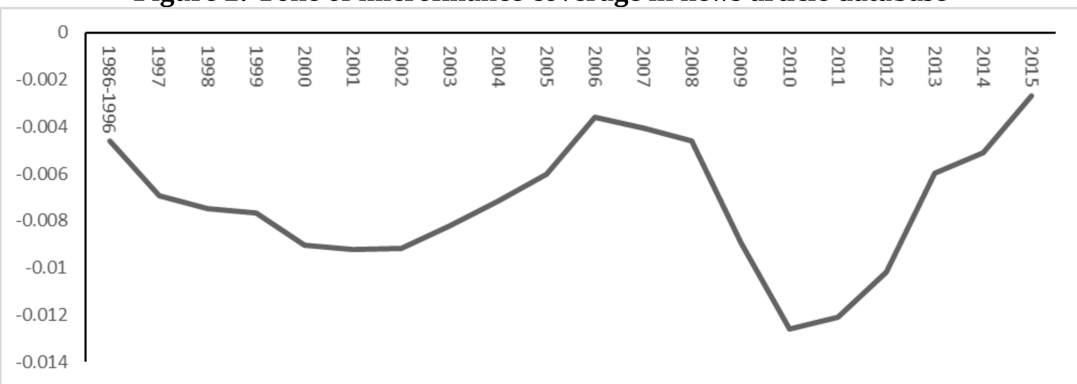
Figure 1: Coverage of microfinance in news article database



Note: Three-period moving average

Figure 2: Tone of microfinance coverage in news article database



Note: Three-period moving average; 1 = completely positive tone, -1 = completely negative tone

Table 1: Framing tactics, themes, and illustrative quotes in three key periods

Period	Framing tactic	Definition	Theme	Examples
1986-2007	Diagnostic framing	Identifying a social problem and its cause or source (adapted from Allen, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988)	Poverty is perpetuated by a lack of access to credit	"For many impoverished women […] starting a business is their only hope for survival. But it can be extremely difficult for them to tap into outside financing to expand them from their rudimentary beginnings." (Cummings, 2005, *New York Times*)
	Social mission framing	Claiming goals and practices to resolve the identified social problem (adapted from Benford, 1993)	Microcredit can solve poverty	"'It gives people empowerment,' said Patricia Saiki, the SBA administrator. 'If you're in a low-income group and you want to get out of that cycle […] this is an unusual opportunity.'" (Cooper, 1992, *Washington Post*)

2008-2012	Authenticity contestation frames (by micro-finance critics)	Criticisms and/or accusations that the industry, in whole or in part, does not adhere to its projected image or values	1) Commercialisation leads to value betrayal 2) Micro-credit does not reduce poverty, contrary to industry claims	1) "Public offerings on shares in microfinance institutions have generated stratospheric revenues but have also pushed interest rates on the loans sky high. Inevitably controversy will ensue when something conceived as an avenue out of poverty becomes a feeding frenzy for lenders." (Rooney, 2010, *New York Times*) 2) "Now another study […] provides a chilly accounting of microfinance's impact contrary to the lavish claims of poverty reduction and female empowerment." (Bunting, 2011c, *The Guardian*)
	Segregation framing tactics	Blaming specific actors as culprits for damaging the industry's aura; distancing the industry from named culprits (adapted from Humphreys & Thompson, 2014)	Distancing the microfinancing industry from 'rogue' microfinancing institutions	"Some microlenders […] say that while there may be some rogue lenders out there that try to lend too much to the poor and then harass them for payments, a majority of the top lenders have high ethical standards and are in the business to try to improve the livelihoods of the poor, not intimidate them out of their hard-earned rupees." (Bellman & Chang, *Wall Street Journal*, 2010)
	Virtue anchoring and characterisation framing (by micro-finance traditionalists)	Virtue anchoring: re-asserting the industry's virtues and moral character Characterisation: in internal industry conflicts, characterizing opponents in a negative light (adapted from Shmueli et al. 2006)	Rooting microfinance in its virtuous legacy; denouncing those who endorse commercialisation.	"Pisey Phal, the chief executive of CCSF, emphasises that her organisation is concerned with poverty alleviation, not profits." (Ford, 2011, *The Guardian*) "Credit programs that seek to profit from the suffering of the poor should not be described as 'microcredit,' and investors who own such programs should not be allowed to benefit from the trust and respect that microcredit banks have rightly earned." (Yunus, 2011, *The New York Times*)
	Frame bridging (proponents of commercialisation)	Linking a specific activity or practice as vital to achieving a desirable social goal or mission (adapted from Snow et al. 1986)	Pursuit of profit is necessary to advance the industry's social mission	"But the potential beneficiaries of microfinance far outnumber those of current inflows of capital from traditional sources such as private donations and government aid, says Ashwini Narayanan, general manager for MicroPlace […] 'The supply gap is $300bn […] That is not going to come from philanthropists. You need investor capital.'" (Stabile, 2010, *The Financial Times*)

2010-2016	Diagnostic reframing	Similar to diagnostic framing, involves seemingly small or modest changes to an industry's original diagnosis	The poor do not just lack access to credit, they lack access to other formal financial services	"Having a bank account and credit card seems normal to many people, but for more than 2.5 billion people in the developing world, it is almost unimaginable. Excluded from the formal financial sector, they have no access to savings or current accounts, credit or other basic types of financial services." (Jones, 2012, *The Guardian*)
	Social mission reframing	Similar to social-mission framing; involves seemingly small or modest changes to industry's original social mission	Financial inclusion is empowerment; contributes to development and the welfare of the poor	"With 2.5 billion people around the world still excluded from the formal financial system, there is growing interest in how to extend financial services to the 'unbanked' […] Their exclusion from formal financial services forces them to rely on risky and expensive alternatives, which stifles both individual and macro-level economic development." (van Vark, 2013, *The Guardian*)

Table 2: A comparison of the conceptual vectors stimulating research on aura and legitimacy

Legitimacy	**Industry Aura**
Focus on external environment (outside-in)	Focus on intrinsic virtues and how they are projected (inside-out)
Compliance with external regulations, norms and cognitive-cultural schemas	Pursuit of virtues and social missions above the standard norms of 'business as usual'
Winning acceptance, 'normality' and taken-for-grantedness	Projecting unique virtues, rooted in authentic commitment to intrinsic values

Table 3: Managerial implications

Framing type	**Ability to monitor and detect:**	**Cultivation of industry aura via:**
Diagnostic	the framing of industry in relation to social problems	advancing persuasive diagnostic frames
Mission	the framing of industry's social goals and commitments	proselytizing compelling mission frames
Authenticity contestation	contentious framing of industry as inauthentic	attunement to potentially detrimental contestation
Virtue anchoring	framing that reasserts the industry's virtues and moral character	asserting the industry's heritage of virtue

Segregation	mitigating authenticity crisis via scapegoating	distancing the industry from malignant industry members

APPENDIX A: INDUSTRY FAMILIARISATION SOURCES

Popular Books

Bateman, M. *Why Doesn't Microfinance Work? The Destructive Rise of Local Neoliberalism*. Economics/Development. London: Zed Books, 2010.

Roodman, D. *Due Diligence: What Social Investors Should Know About Microfinance*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2011.

Sinclair, H. *Confessions of a Microfinance Heretic: How Microlending Lost Its Way and Betrayed the Poor*. San Francisco, Calif: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012.

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APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND/CONTEXT OF THE MICROFINANCE INDUSTRY

The emergence of modern microfinance (1976–1997)

Modern microfinance emerged in the 1970s, when material, political, and ideological preconditions provided a fertile context for alternative credit provisioning models in South Asia (Sinha et al., 2006). While NGOs in other world regions, such as Accion in Brazil, also started micro-credit programmes around this time, the most famous is Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, founded by Muhammad Yunus in 1983 (Roodman, 2011). The success of early microfinance NGOs, combined with Yunus' promotion of microcredit, attracted the attention of private donors and governments. An increasing number of NGOs and commercial and state-run banks began to join the microfinance industry (Bateman & Chang, 2012).

By the mid-1990s, the World Bank reported that over 900 institutions offered microfinance services to 1,000 or more clients. Many successful microfinance NGOs transformed into commercial entities to attract private-investor funding and ensure continued support of multilateral development institutions (Fouillet et al., 2013). The Microcredit Summit, held in Washington, D.C. in 1997, marked the arrival of microcredit into the "development mainstream" (Mader, 2015) and signalled the emergence of a discernible industry on a mission to bring microloans to 100 million families around the globe by 2005.

The 'golden years' of microfinance (1998–2007)

By the late 1990s, growth and financial self-sufficiency became the main priorities of the blossoming microfinance industry (Manos et al. 2013; Weber 2002). The 'new wave' of for-profit microfinance organisations further strengthened the commercial interests and stakes in microfinance (Bateman & Chang, 2012). The World Bank set up the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) in 2001 with the task of promoting efficiency, homogeneity, and transparency in the industry, and to help ease its transition from an NGO sub-sector into "a transnational market of microfinance" (Mader 2015, 59).

The United Nations declared 2005 as the International Year of Microcredit, crowning the microfinance industry as a paragon of development and progress. In 2006, Yunus and the Grameen Bank were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for "their efforts to create economic and social development from below" (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2006). At this time, platforms such as Kiva.org mobilized members of the (Western) public to sponsor microloans for the poor via online lending. These platforms promote micro-lending as a morally dignified alternative to charitable donations (Bajde, 2013).

Crisis and reformation (2008-2012)

Starting in 2007, the global microfinance industry was rocked by a series of crises. The IPO of Compartamos, a Mexican organisation founded as an NGO, came to symbolize "an aggressive move by capitalists to profit from the poor" (*The Economist, 2008).* The transformations of NGOs into highly profitable entities sparked concerns that the original goal of alleviating poverty was taking a backseat to commercial imperatives of growth and profit (Copestake et al. 2016; Fouillet et al. 2013; Manos et al. 2013).

At the same time, multiple long-term studies failed to confirm any significant effects of microfinance on poverty, challenging older studies that found positive effects (Roodman 2011, Bateman and Chang 2012). In 2008, microcredit markets around the world began to crash. Rapidly growing client defaults and massive client withdrawal began in Morocco, Nicaragua, and Pakistan (Mader 2015). These were followed by the highly publicized microfinance crash in Andhra Pradesh, India (Bateman and Chang 2012).

Despite these events, the microfinance industry has continued to expand (Hailey et al. 2016). The shift towards financial inclusion satisfied donors, investors, and policy makers (Reed, 2011). From 2015 to 2017 the number of borrowers increased by 28.6 percent to an estimated 139 million, with a loan portfolio of US$ 114 billion, representing a 33.6 percent increase (*Convergences*, 2018).

APPENDIX C: TIMELINES OF MICROFINANCE INDUSTRY ACTORS AND EVENTS

Figure C.1: Timeline of Selected Industry Actors/Organisations

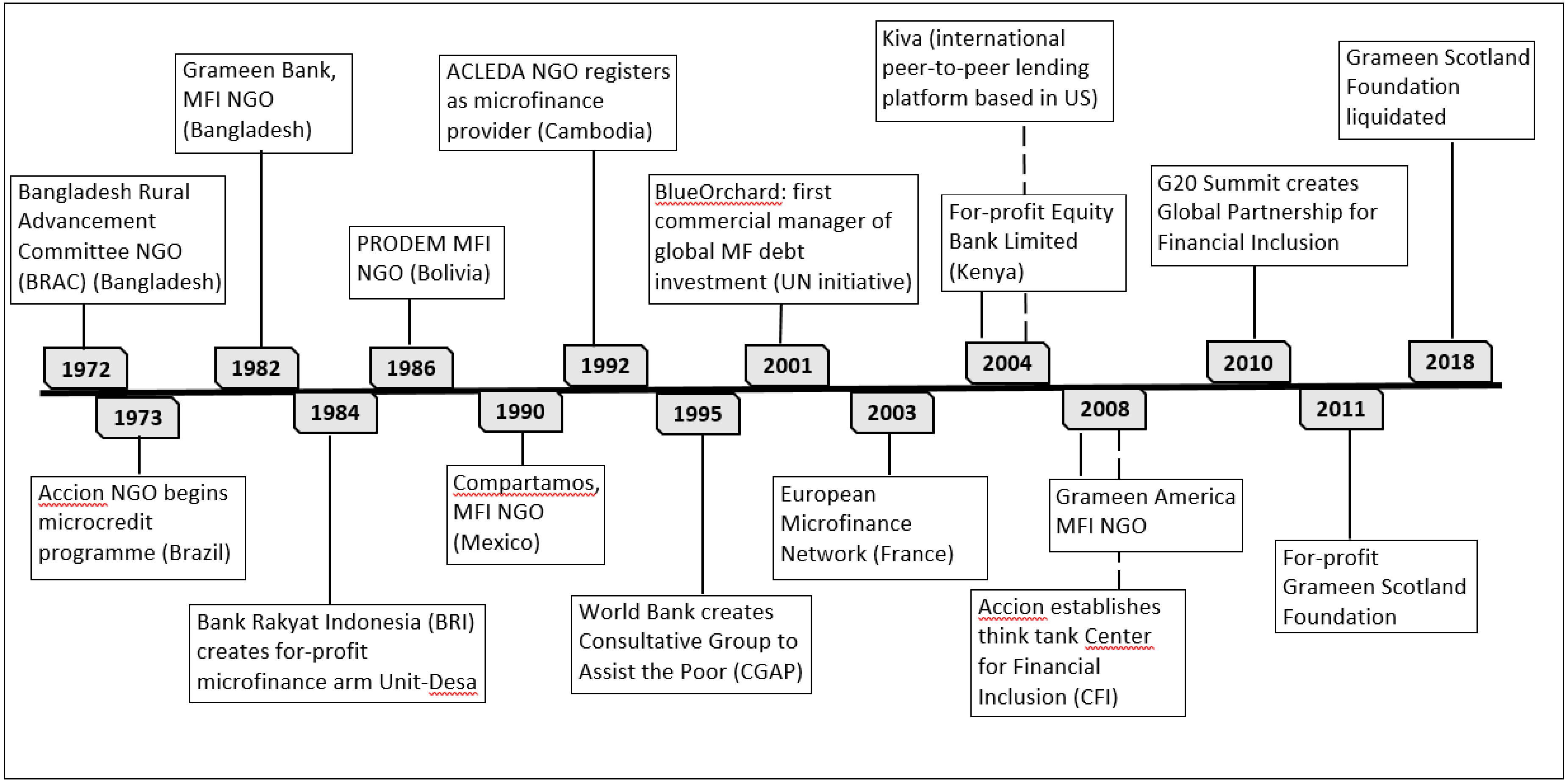

Figure C.2: Timeline of Selected Industry Events