Interfering in Sustainable Travelling of Customers and Employers: An Empirical Study and Implications to Purpose Marketing from a customer perspective

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Abstract

The mobility behavior of people changes in accordance with, and is influenced by, multiple aspects including climate change, pandemics or wars. As corporate businesses are becoming increasingly more engaged in political conversations about these topics, the question as to what extent should travel behavior be influenced by companies and organizations from a customer perspective. This work begins by stating the relevance of the sustainable and ethical behavior of companies, organizations, and purpose marketing. The study is based upon an empirical survey with 180 participants questioned on issues of companies interfering with their customers and employees' choices regarding transportation, and whether they should interfere at all. The results of the study revealed that for our sample, the interference of companies and organizations was overall supported, although the differences between the kind of interference were noted. It was found that companies should become more active, which can be accomplished with the support of purpose marketing.

Keywords: purpose marketing, sustainability, travel behavior, commute, mobility behavior

1 Introduction: Business Ethics, CSR and Purpose Marketing

Until recently, it was common for companies – especially those in Europe- to refuse to comment on politics, or to show their political stance (Scherer/Palazzo 2011, p. 899f.; Moorman 2020, p. 388f.; Xu/Lee/Rim 2021, p. 1f.). However, the 1980 saw the topic of **business ethics** begin to be discussed more intensively (Drucker 1981; Bowie 1985; Jones/Parker/ten Bos 2005, p. 15). Likewise, the topic of "**corporate social responsibility**" (CSR) (e.g. Lindgreen/Swaen 2010; Brown/Knudsen 2015; He/Harris 2020) has also garnered increased attention. CSR is built the notion of sustained ethical behavior in corporate activities and includes the practices of inter alia fairness and transparency, respecting diverse cultures, or involving disadvantaged and marginalized groups (Singh/Singh 2013, p. 16). More recently, two additional trends can be identified, as will be explained below.

On the one hand, these concepts have undergone increased criticism and scrutiny by both the media and consumers in regards to their authenticity, which has, in some cases, been labelled as 'fake PR measures'. This is defined in practice and science, particularly with regard to sustainability, under the term "**Greenwashing**" (Laufer 2003; Chen/Chang 2013; Gatti/Seele/Rademacher 2019), although other forms of corresponding fakes have also attracted attention for other aspects (e.g. **Rainbow Washing** (Champlin/Le 2020; Johns et al. 2022), **Autonowashing** (Dixon 2020), **Blue Washing** (Elving 2013, p. 278; Ruiz-Blanco/Romero/Fernandez-Feijoo 2022, p. 4027) and **Purple Washing** (Castillo-Abdul/Pérez-Escoda/Civila 2022; Chiru/Ivan/Arcos 2022, p. 3).

On the other hand, the development of **purpose marketing** parallel to these phenomena can be observed. It is not beyond the realm of common comprehension that, nowadays, companies are asked to extend their usual business practices to efforts that have a higher purpose and thereby contribute to an enriched society in a way that can be perceived as truthful, authentic, and honest (Hollensbe et. al 2014, p. 1232; Zu 2019, p. 2; Fitzsimmons/Qin/Heffron 2022, p. 208).

The theoretical basis of a **corporate purpose** is one where a company attempts to exceed its intention of maximizing profits and complying with legal requirements by making a meaningful and sustainable contribution to society; this concept therefore encompasses much more than

any CSR campaign or any individual mission, vision, or value statement of a company (Zu 2019, p. 2; Henderson 2021, p. 5481; Qin et al. 2022, p. 426).

Regarding the term's origin, it should be noted that purpose statements in an organizational context have been in use for hundreds of years. Indeed, the concept can even be found in European charters dating back to the year 625, when a community of monks from the Rebais monastery formulated a purpose-driven charter for their daily tasks (Pollman 2021, p. 1429). However, it was not until 2009 that the idea of a corporate purpose was conceptualized and theoretically developed by Simon Sinek, who, in his book, "Start with Why", broadened the scope of common business practices by asking for the higher motifs or reasons for existence of a company, while arguing **that customers do not buy what companies are selling, but rather,** ***why*** **they are selling** (Sinek 2009, p. 73).

Following Sinek's publication, the focuses of companies have increasingly diverted to the development of purpose marketing efforts that are then integrated into both strategic business management, and in the corporate value chain – including the definition and delivery of a long-term value-added promise that can operate on a local or global scale, in order to gain the customers' trust (Zu 2019, p. 8; Bruce/Jeromin 2020, p. 13).

Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine have obviously reinforced this trend towards a more explicit stance - and even **interference** - being made by companies regarding political issues. To that end, these crises can be considered as a booster for purpose marketing (Qin et al. 2022, p. 438). Rentz (2020) already described the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'stress test' for the concept of purpose marketing, the high relevance of which is evident in a variety of corporate scenarios. For instance, 2021 saw more than 150 companies (including Lidl, McDonald's, BMW, Mercedes, etc.) appeal to the public to vaccinate against Covid 19 through a joint advertising campaign that modified their commercial slogans in order to fit the topic (Scheppe 2021, online). Conversely, companies that were still selling products in Russia in the spring of 2022 faced a lot of criticism in the media and on social media (Bożena 2022, p. 24; Lim et al. 2022, p. 31; Tosun/Eshragi 2022).

Based on these developments, the question arises as to whether customers are in favor of such interferences by companies (and organizations) in political issues or politics themselves, and how different customer demographics may vary from one another in this aspect. To find answers to these questions, this article empirically investigates whether companies and organizations should intervene or not from the customer's point of view. Moreover, it is explored as to whether the opinions of customers and customer segments differ according to the demographic in question.

2   Special Challenge: Sustainable travelling

As part of a cooperation between a large technical university in Germany and UNU-FLORES, the University of the United Nations, the topic of how, and if, organizations (and analogously also companies) should respond to **the travel behavior of their stakeholders** was identified as a major challenge and research question. Particularly for international organizations like the UN, and analogously in international companies, travel has traditionally played an important role in every day operation. Moreover, as a sustainability-oriented research institution, UNU-FLORES also focuses on the question as to which extent the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the various aspects of sustainability, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development

Goals (SDG). To that end, Spring of 2022 saw the cooperation additionally investigate how attitudes towards (sustainable) travel behavior have changed in this context.

The issue of **sustainable travel behavior** has gained significance higher relevance within the last years for several reasons:

- The Covid-19 pandemic and the corresponding lockdowns have proved that many meetings in presence can be replaced by digital conferences. For this reason, many employees and customers have permanently changed their travel behavior (Hiselius/Arnfalk 2021, p. 2; Mouratidis/Peters/van Wee 2021, p. 16).
- Even before the Covid-19 pandemic and the related effects on travelling and digitalization, it was assumed that digitalization makes it possible to replace trips (Julsrud/Denstadli/Hjorthol 2014).
- The war against Ukraine has pushed the issue of energy scarcity and related (energy-intensive) travel even more to the foreground (Creutzig 2022, p. 461; Zakeri et al. 2022).
- The consequences of climate change resulting from man-made CO_2 emissions are more apparent than ever (e.g. van Aalst 2006, p. 6ff.; IPCC 2022, 6ff.), with the transportation sector globally responsible for around 23% of total energy-related CO_2 emissions (Mohsin et al. 2019, p. 32824).
- Issues of family friendliness and work-life balance have become more crucial over the last years (Brough et al. 2020, p. 475).

Due to the increasing relevance of purpose marketing, the question arises as to how customers and the public have assessed these trends. To explore this question, a study was designed and carried out as part of a university seminar to examine the customer's viewpoint on this topic in more detail – the central questions to which included:

- Should companies and organizations interfere in their employee's choice of transportation?
- Should companies and organizations interfere in their customers' (or comparable target groups') choice of transportation?
- Should companies and organizations become publicize their politically stances?

As the purpose of this study was to evaluate the opinions of a younger cohort of customers and employees, a sample of (mainly) students was collected. The empirical design and the results of the quantitative study are presented in the following section.

3 A Customer perspective: An Empirical Study

To find answers to the three questions mentioned above, an empirical study was conducted in June 2022. The questions were formulated as statements, and asked on a five-point rating scale. In addition, various other questions on the topic of "sustainable travel" and selected socio-demographic variables were derived from the questionnaire. The questionnaire was slightly revised after a pre-test, and then distributed in the (private) networks of the student participants of the seminar. A total of 180 valid questionnaires were returned (99 male, 79 female, 2 other gender).

In regard to the three main questions pertaining to purpose marketing, it was found that the interference of companies and organizations was generally endorsed, with 74.4% of the respondents stating that organizations and companies should interfere in their employees' transportation choices (top 2 selected on the five-point scale). The latter applied to 53.9% of the respondents regarding the customer's transportation choices. As indicated in the following

figure, 46.4% agreed that companies and organizations should generally become politically involved, with the latter in particular showing the necessity of a differentiated view with regard to the interference of companies in political issues: An interference in the travel behaviour of employees is emphasized more strongly than an interference in the travel behaviour of customers - and both are at the same time also a special case in the sense that obviously far less interference by companies in other political issues is generally considered to be good.
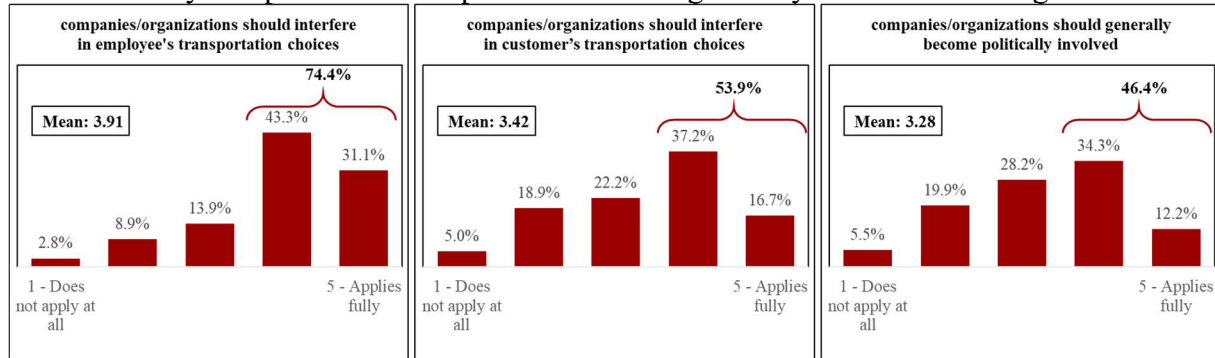

Figure 1: Distribution of attitudes regarding interference of companies and organizations. Own figure.

The differences of the means of the three variables are in two cases significant (t-test for dependent variables, 3.91 > 3.42 with $p<0.001$; 3.91 > 3.28 with $p<0.001$ and 3.42 > 3.28 with $p=0.07$).

Further analyses showed neither gender nor professional status (measured in four categories) to be significantly associated with attitudes regarding purpose marketing, while the distribution of age was deemed too homogenous to make valid conclusions.

Moreover, the questionnaire asked the respondents on five-point-scales as to whether

- they had used the train less during the core pandemic between April 2020 and December 2021 (variable *Train_core*)
- they had used the train more often since the beginning of 2022 (variable *Train_after_core*)
- they are planning to use the train more often in the future (variable *Train_future*)

Of the respondents, 57.7% stated that they used the train less often between April 2020 and December 2021, in comparison to the period before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (top 2 selected on the five-point scale). On the other hand, 31.5% said that they chose to take the train more often in the first months of 2022, in comparison to the peak time of the pandemic. Additionally, 36.6% stated their intention to use trains more often in the future.

To evaluate the relationship between attitudes regarding purpose marketing and the usage of trains, a correlation analysis was conducted – the results of which are presented in the following table 1:

	Train _core	Train _after _core	Train _future	Inter-ference Employes	Inter-ference Customer	Get politically involved
Train_core	1 (0)	,364*** (0)	,268*** (0)	-0,063 (0,401)	-0,09 (0,231)	0,027 (0,72)
Train_after_core		1 (0)	,464*** (0)	0,066 (0,381)	0,117 (0,117)	0,091 (0,223)
Train_future			1 (0)	,207** (0,006)	,189* (0,011)	,222** (0,003)
Interference Employees				1 (0)	,512*** (0)	,183* (0,014)

Interference Customer					1 (0)	,239** (0,001)
Get politically involved						1 (0)

Table 1: Correlation coefficients and corresponding p-values for train usages and attitudes regarding purpose marketing. Own calculation.

It can be observed that neither the usage of trains during the core pandemic, nor after the core pandemic in 2022 is significantly correlated with the attitudes. However, the planned usage of trains in the future is significantly positively associated with sympathy for measures of purpose marketing: The higher the intended train usage is in the future, the higher will be the desire for the interference of companies and organizations in employee and customer choices, as well as interference in political matters in general.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked on five-point scales as to whether their transportation choices are influenced by costs, aspects of sustainability, comfort, the availability of transportation services, as well as the duration of the trip. The following table 2 shows the estimation results of OLS regressions when using the impact factors of the transportation choice as independent variables.

	Interference Employees	Interference Customer	Get politically involved
(Constant)	1,608* (0,622)	2,184** (0,703)	2,733*** (0,711)
Costs	0,175* (0,069)	-0,095 (0,078)	-0,003 (0,079)
Sustainability	0,238*** (0,062)	0,321*** (0,07)	0,235** (0,07)
Comfort	-0,079 (0,071)	-0,097 (0,08)	-0,013 (0,081)
Availability	0,42*** (0,104)	0,271* (0,117)	-0,09 (0,119)
Duration	-0,193* (0,08)	-0,063 (0,09)	0,067 (0,091)
Adj. R^2	0,181	0,120	0,039
F	8,858***	5,857***	2,464*
Shapiro-Wilk-test of residuals	p = 1.482e-06	p = 0.03915	p = 0.005523
Breusch-Pagan-Test	p = 0.3629	p = 0.1177	p = 0.6471
Durbin-Watson	p = 0.878	p = 0.756	p = 0.934
max(VIF_k)	1.207994	1.207994	1.207994

Table 2: Estimation results: impact factors of the transportation choice as independent variables. Own calculation.

It is rather striking that the respondents who stated their transportation choices to be influenced by sustainability factors were significantly more in favour of the measures of purpose marketing. Interestingly, those respondents who agreed upon availability being is important to their choice were found significantly more to agree with company interference regarding transportation of employees and customers. On the other hand, respondents stating that the duration of a trip was more important to their choice for them, often opposed this interference, while the importance of the comfort of a trip did not have a significant impact at all. The regression results shown above do not suffer from heteroscedasticity, autocorrelation, or multicollinearity, as it is proved by the Breusch-Pagan-Test, the Durbin-Watson-Test, as well as the variance inflation factors (VIF). Nevertheless, the residuals are not normally distributed, as it is indicated by the rejection of the Shapiro-Wilk-test in all cases. This is the only violated OLS assumption.

4 Conclusions, Limitations, Outlook

The empirical results show that, from the customer's point of view, **interfering in sustainable traveling of customers and employers** is regarded as very desirable by the examined (young) target group. Furthermore, from the customer's point of view, current discussions concerning the travel behaviour of the stakeholders of organizations and companies have correspondingly high relevance, and at the same time, offer great opportunities for appropriate purpose marketing.

Two caveats should be pointed out here, however. Firstly, following Ebeling (2020), a control of travel behaviour and the corresponding purpose marketing must not make the mistake of becoming a **"Purpose Washing"** endeavour (Ebeling 2020, p.12) – in the same way that a company can be labelled "green washing" in terms of the ecological dimension.

Moreover, the results show stark differences both between customer groups, and with regard to the topics in which companies should intervene from the customer's point of view: As was shown, in the case of travel, the **customer's own travel behaviour** shapes their attitude toward corresponding control by companies. As such while there are **segments** that appreciate interference, there are also the opposite. In the case of the latter, purpose marketing can, and possibly even will, provoke rejection.

Above all, however, customers also notably differentiated according to the specific areas in which they felt companies should interfere. Here, clear differentiations can be seen between the travel behaviour of employees, the travel behaviour of customers, and **political interference in general**, with the latter point in particular deviating even more significantly than is evident from the figures available, as this question was potentially exposed to a bias of the questionnaire, and the corresponding frame of "traveling". Moreover, for further research other quantitative methods like SEM for deeper insights into the related constructs could be applied.

To that end, the need for **further studies** is evident. These could include studies of target groups other than those investigated, and above all, should consider the additional topics in which companies intervene – along with the various segments. According to our own assessment, those companies that correctly (and in a differentiated manner) recognize the **needs of their target groups** will be able to gain major competitive advantages over others, due to the topics of **sustainability and purpose** continuing to increase in relevance and public awareness.

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