

# Perception of Rainbow Washing – Empirical Results From Two European Countries on a New Marketing Challenge

*Janek Mücksch*, Research Associate, Chair of Marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics,  
Technische Universität Dresden, Germany  
E-Mail: [janek.muecksch@tu-dresden.de](mailto:janek.muecksch@tu-dresden.de), Phone: +49 351 463-32334

*Associate Prof. Dr. Martin Nielsen*, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus  
University, Denmark  
E-Mail: [mn@cc.au.dk](mailto:mn@cc.au.dk), Phone: +45 87164889

*Prof. Dr. Florian Siems*, Chairholder, Chair of Marketing, Faculty of Business and  
Economics, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany  
E-Mail: [florian.siems@tu-dresden.de](mailto:florian.siems@tu-dresden.de), Phone: +49 351 463-39197

## Abstract

Companies taking a stance in terms of purpose marketing, brand activism, or corporate social advocacy have gained more attention in recent years. As a result, more and more companies are using LGBT symbols in their communications, especially during the so-called “Pride Month”. However, companies that use LGBT symbols are not always accepted. Using data from two different European countries, we find evidence that only part of the population favours companies taking a stance and using LGBT symbols. Moreover, we find strong evidence that the vast majority suspect rainbow washing - using LGBT symbols by companies without real conviction and LGBT-friendly actions. We contribute to the existing literature on washing and recommend using LGBT symbols in communication - but only if LGBT concerns are sufficiently addressed.

**Keywords:** diversity, purpose marketing, rainbow marketing, rainbow washing

## **1. Introduction: Purpose Marketing, Marketing with Diversity and Rainbow, and the Challenge of Perceived Rainbow Washing**

Since the 1980s, topics such as “business ethics” and later “corporate social responsibility” have begun to evolve in academic literature and practice (Drucker, 1981; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). Consequently, there has been a huge debate for decades on whether and how companies should take a stance on political issues (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Klein et al., 2023; Moorman, 2020; Mücksch, Ruckau, et al., 2023).

Within the past ten years, two additional trends can be identified (Mücksch, Ruckau, et al., 2023): On the one hand, it has become more important in marketing and especially in communication that companies explicitly express themselves socio-politically to their customers (“purpose marketing”, see e. g. Bruce & Jeromin (2020); Gartenberg et al. (2019)). This trend was reinforced by the crises of recent years - the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020; Oluwasanmi, 2022; Rentz, 2020) and the war against Ukraine (Campillo-Lundbeck, 2022).

On the other hand, an increasingly critical attitude of (potential) customers of companies can be seen in the fact that “washing” is often suspected. More precisely, this means that companies do not engage in such communication out of true conviction but only to present themselves positively or even divert attention from negative behaviour (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Dixon, 2020; Pope & Wæraas, 2016). Thematically, this goes far beyond the most commonly discussed greenwashing and today concerns several socio-political issues (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022; Du et al., 2010). In the last two years, there has been particularly intense discussion, for example, on the occasion of the Men’s Football World Cup in Qatar in December 2022 (Sonnenschein, 2022). Regarding this football tournament, there has been a debate, especially about the extent to which diversity and specifically marketing with the rainbow flag is only a supposed commitment or partial commitment or even washing (“rainbow washing”) (Heerdt & Roorda, 2023; Rusch, 2023).

This is where this article comes in. More and more companies are focussing on the communication of a purpose (Klein et al., 2023; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and LGBT symbols (E. L. Ciszek & Pounders, 2020; E. Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Lewis et al., 2017). Consequently, and of particular interest to service providers, we formulate the following research questions:

How do target groups perceive the communication of purpose in general, and LGBT symbols in particular? Moreover, what is the extent of perceived rainbow washing among target groups? To the best of our knowledge, there is no current data on this in combination with these three related topics.

In order to analyze this question, we had the opportunity to include three matching identical questions in both surveys for two other studies, each of which had a different focus. These studies took place in Germany and Austria, which allowed us to make a cross-country comparison in addition to our research question.

The structure of this paper is as follows:

First, it briefly shows how the idea of rainbow symbolism emerged and became increasingly relevant for marketing, but also how this idea is critically discussed (Section 2). Subsequently, the results from parts of two of our own empirical studies on how young target groups in two different countries assess “rainbow washing” are presented for the first time. We show to what extent a young target group suspects rainbow washing.

## **2. Theoretical Background/History: Rainbow and Rainbow Washing**

In recent years, the rainbow flag has advanced to an almost ubiquitous symbol for the LGBT+ community (Hauksson-Tresch, 2021). It was paramount to its designer, Gilbert Baker, that the new flag *not* become a registered trademark but remain a common sign that everyone affiliated with the community could use freely (Fisher & Antonelli, 2023). He therefore asked a law firm to ensure the free usability of the rainbow flag, a protection from being registered as a trademark still valid today (Corsearch, 2020).

This is of particular interest to the commercial use of the rainbow colours because until today, there still is no corporation that can claim the rainbow flag as a trademark or brand, nor is there a governance body or organisation that can assign the rainbow flag as a label for LGBT+-friendly companies. That is one of the reasons why companies easily and without any legal concern can use rainbow colours as a visual label to express their support of the LGBT community – and also frequently and very visibly do so (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018).

In general, companies support or strategically incorporate a range of environmental and social issues (cf. section 1) because such corporate social responsibility is increasingly in demand by customers and other stakeholders (Melander, 2017) and is required by law (e.g., ESG directive), and communicating CSR may mean a competitive advantage (Frynas, 2015).

However, due to the possible positive image effects of communicating CSR, companies sometimes just pay lip service to a particular issue and either do not whole-heartedly support a given cause, exaggerate their effort and the positive consequences their activities have on it, or downplay, conceal or even outright lie about the negative consequences (Li, 2022), a practice known as “washing” (Nielsen, 2023). The most commonly known term is greenwashing, which is presenting a company as more environmentally friendly than it actually is (Whellams & MacDonald, 2018). Other forms have subsequently emerged, such as bluewashing (Peleo & Chen, 2019) or redwashing (Vanclay & Hanna, 2019). Thus, rainbow washing is a company presenting itself as more LGBT-friendly than it actually is (E. Ciszek, 2018; Wulf et al., 2022).

Whereas the accusation of rainbow washing (and other X-washings) faces the epistemological difficulty of finding out what the “actual” LGBT-friendliness of a company is, a recent reconceptualisation of washing has been proposed that washing is entirely in the eyes of the beholder, i.e., a communicative practice is washing if the recipients conceive of it as washing (Seele & Gatti, 2017).

In concrete terms, this raises the question of how rainbow washing is currently perceived by a young target group. This is regarded as the starting point for an empirical study in two countries. The results are presented below.

## **3. Empirical Results from Two European Countries**

In order to answer the question raised, the opportunity was taken to include suitable additional questions on the topic of the present paper in two other quantitative studies. The two studies were independent, had a different main focus, and were published elsewhere (Study 1: Mücksch et al. (2023); Study 2: Siems et al. (2023)). However, these additional questions were identical in both studies, and the results are presented exclusively in this paper.

Both studies were conducted in June 2023 at university courses in Germany (Study 1) and Austria (Study 2). In Germany, the questionnaires were distributed digitally. Study 2 used paper-based questionnaires. The following Table 1 provides demographic information on the samples.

	Study 1 (n=82)	Study 2 (n=118)
Country	Germany	Austria
Institution	Technical University	University of Applied Science
Gender	Female: 30 (36.6 %) Male: 52 (63.4 %) Other/no answer: 0 (0 %)	Female: 48 (40.7 %) Male: 60 (50.8 %) Other/no answer: 10 (8.5%)
Age	Min: 18 Max: 26 Mean: 21.16; SD = 2.24	Min: 19 Max: 39 Mean: 24.97; SD = 4.13
Field of Studies	Business and Economics: 67 (81.7 %) Non-business: 15 (18.3 %) No Answer: 0 (0 %)	Business and Economics: 69 (75.4 %) Non-business: 22 (18.6 %) No Answer: 7 (5.9 %)

Table 1: Demographic Indicators of both samples.

Table 1 indicates that participants in both samples were relatively young. Moreover, the majority of respondents studied in the field of business and economics (B&E). With regard to the field of study, it was explicitly recorded whether B&E or another subject was studied. This was done for two reasons. On one hand, there could be a possible effect regarding the survey content because it might be related to their studies. On the other hand, for reasons of accessibility, mainly B&E students were surveyed. At the same time, possible differences from other fields of study were to be recorded. A detailed analysis of the "other" degree programmes did not seem to make sense, as this would have violated the anonymity requirement and led to very small, hardly meaningful subgroups. "Non-business students" were therefore considered together in one group.

Firstly, we asked the respondents how they generally regard purpose marketing and using rainbow symbols in business communication. The results are shown in Figure 1.

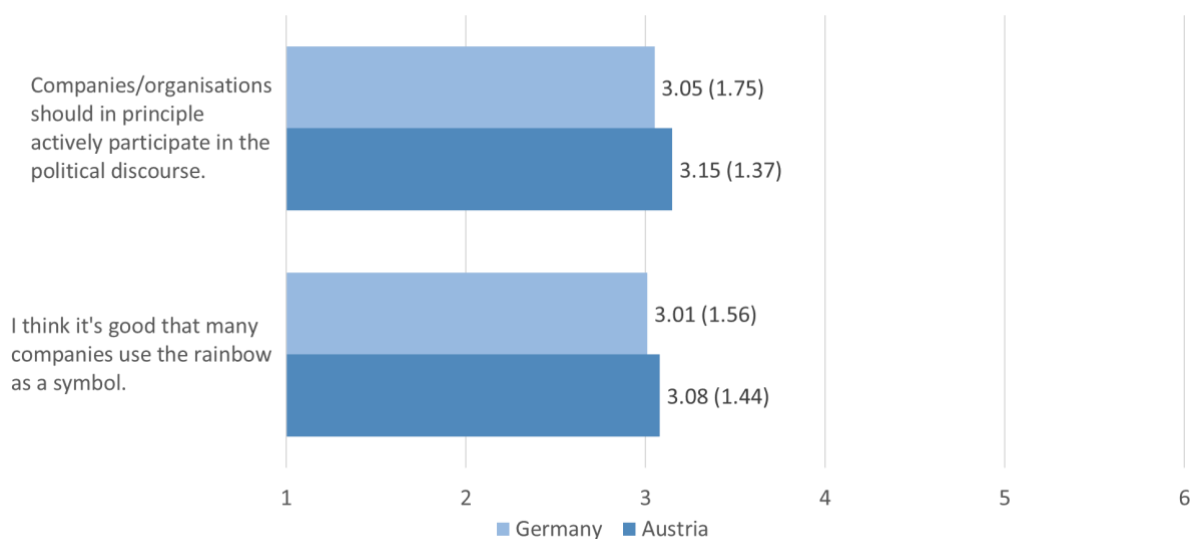
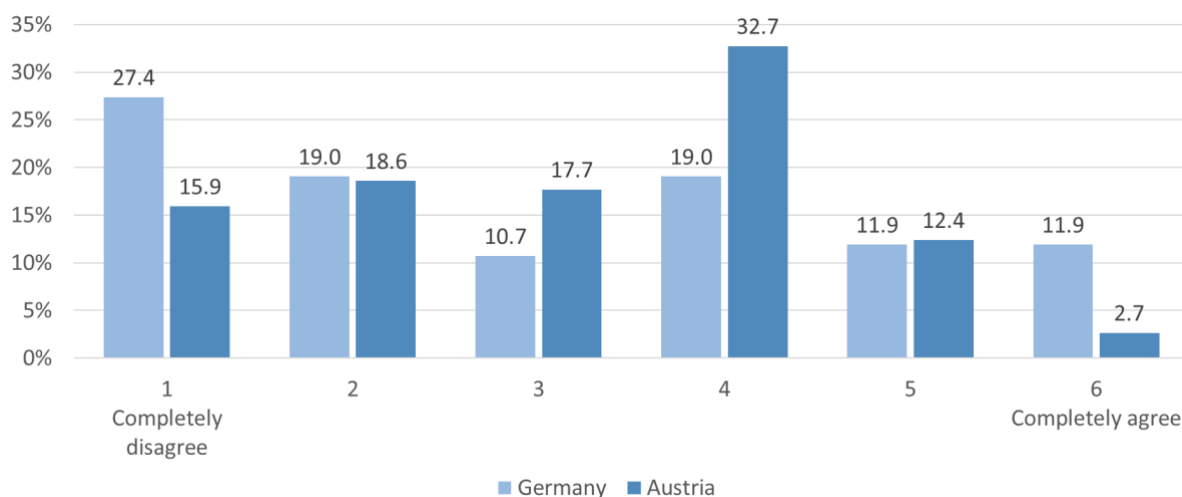


Figure 1: Degree of agreement (1-Disagree; 6-Agree completely) with a statement on purpose marketing in general and the usage of rainbow symbols by companies in particular (mean values and standard deviations in brackets)

First of all, it is noticeable that the mean values in both countries differ only minimally. The difference is not significant (t-test for independent samples;  $p = .656$  or respectively  $p = .756$ ). That we found no country-specific effect could be due to the (well-known) effect that people experiencing higher education (“Anywheres”) tend to have similar values because they are more mobile and more closely related to each other than people not experiencing higher education (“Somewheres”) (Goodhart, 2017).

At the same time, it can be seen that the mean values are neither particularly high (high agreement) nor particularly low (high rejection). On average, in relation to the mean values, neither purpose marketing nor the usage of rainbow symbols initially found high agreement but also no high rejection.

A more differentiated picture emerges when looking at the individual frequencies (Figure 2a and Figure 2b): Some respondents reject the statements (and corresponding marketing strategies) in both countries. When considering the question of whether companies should participate in the political discourse, the "Bottom 2 values" for rejection (scale expressions 1 and 2 combined) here are 46.4% (Germany) and 34.5% (Austria). The "Top 2 values" for agreement (scale expressions 5 and 6 combined) also reveal a separate group, but this is somewhat smaller at 23.8% (Germany) and 15.0% (Austria).



*Figure 2a: Level of agreement (1- Disagree; 6 -Agree completely) on whether companies should participate in the political discourse,*

A similar picture emerges from the "Bottom 2 values" for the usage of rainbow symbols (Figure 2b): Here, too, the group of those who rather or completely disagree dominates in both countries (Germany: 41.7%, Austria: 29.2%). Only relatively few agree with the statement rather or completely (Top 2 Germany: 17.9%, Austria: 16.8%).

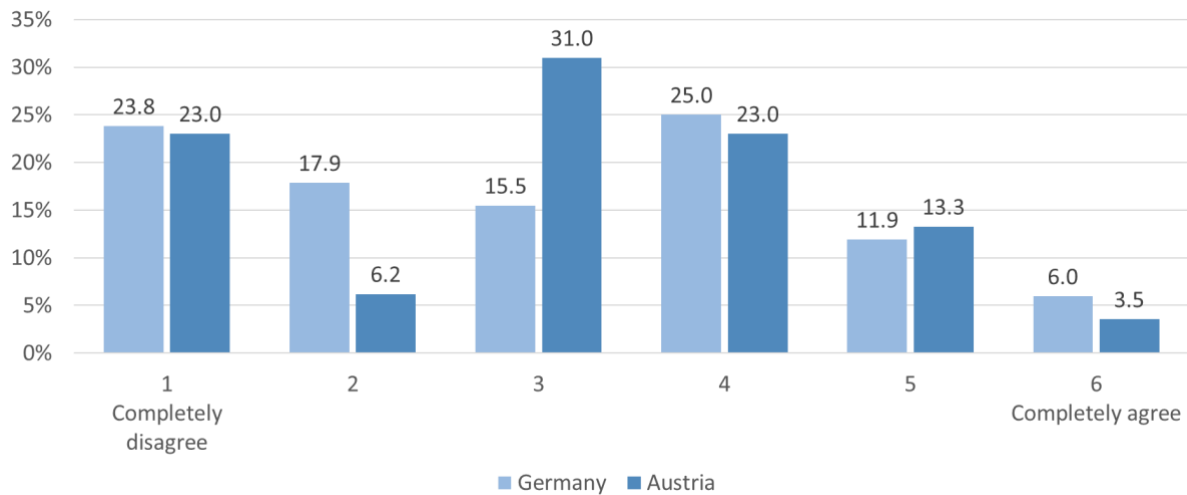


Figure 2b: Level of agreement (1- Disagree; 6 -Agree completely) on whether companies should use the rainbow as a symbol in their communication.

A possible explanation for this rather negative or at least differentiated attitude of many respondents can be seen in two reasons. On one hand, potential customers may reject the rainbow as a symbol for homophobic reasons (Hauksson-Tresch, 2021). A consideration of open responses confirms this assumption. On the other hand, it may be a presumption of rainbow washing. In both countries, many respondents suspect that relatively many companies that use the rainbow as a symbol use it without real conviction (McLean, 2019). More precisely, in both countries, the respondents were asked to state their suspected share of companies using the rainbow as a symbol without any conviction. The mean value in Germany was 63.34% and in Austria 67.15%. Applying a t-test for independent samples shows that there is no significant difference between the countries ( $p = .284$ ). The detailed distribution, which once again drastically illustrates how often - in both countries - rainbow washing is suspected, is shown in Figure 3.

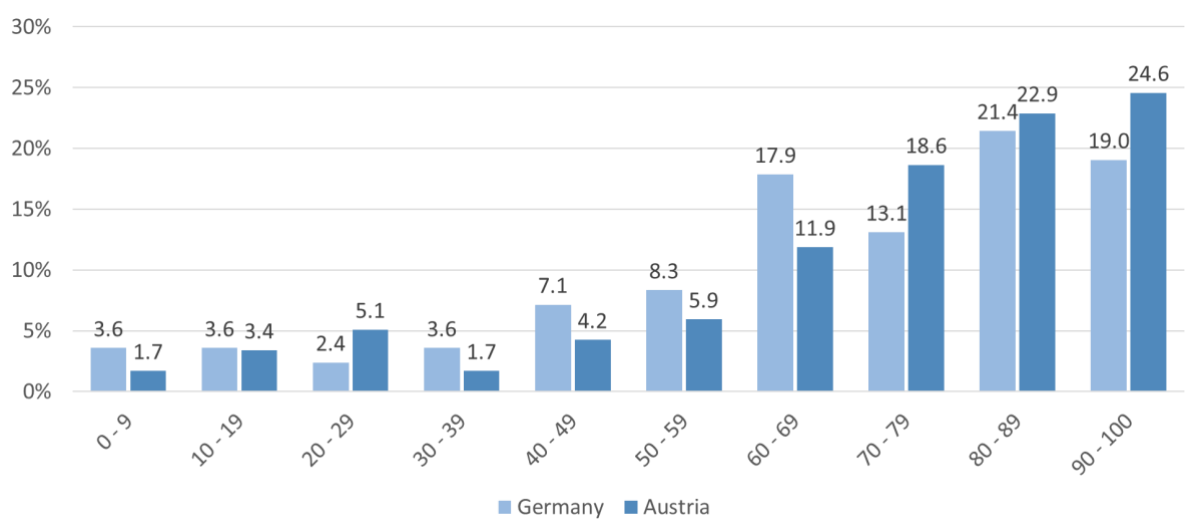


Figure 3: Respondents' suspected proportion of companies (in %) using the rainbow without real conviction ("I suspect that \_\_\_ % of companies using the rainbow as a symbol are using it without real conviction").

In addition to the results shown above, it should be examined whether there are differences between the characteristics of the respondents, especially according to gender, age, and degree program.

With regard to **gender**, it should first be noted that the mean values for women are higher than those for men in terms of agreement with both purpose marketing and the usage of rainbow symbols. This holds for Germany as well as for Austria. This finding suggests that the degree of agreement with both is higher among women than men (see Table 2). This is in line with the existing literature indicating that LGBT acceptance is higher among women than among men (Lewis et al., 2017). Analogous to the values and interpretations above, it is then exactly the opposite of the presumed shares for rainbow washing. Here, women presume lower shares. The differences between men and women are always significant, as indicated by p-values lower than .05.

Statements/Items asked for	Germany		Austria		
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
“Companies/organisations should, in principle, actively participate in the political discourse.”	3.83 (n = 30)	2.60 (n = 52)	3.15 (n = 47)	3.13 (n = 60)	<b>Gender:</b> F(1, 187) = 5.504, p = .02 <b>Country:</b> F(1, 187) = .161, p = .689
“I think it’s good that many companies use the rainbow as a symbol.”	3.77 (n = 30)	2.60 (n = 52)	3.34 (n = 47)	2.93 (n = 60)	<b>Gender:</b> F(1, 87) = 11.75, p < .001 <b>Country:</b> F(1, 187) = .163, p = .687
“I suspect that ___ % of companies using the rainbow as a symbol are using it without real conviction.”	57.52% (n = 29)	66.58% (n = 50)	60.50% (n = 48)	72.63% (n = 57)	<b>Gender:</b> F(1, 82) = 8.802, p = .003 <b>Country:</b> F(1, 182) = 1.149, p = .285

Table 2: Results (mean values) separated by gender (male/female; we refrained from including the two respondents who stated "diverse" as their gender for reasons of the small sub-sample)

We also examined the effects of **age**, although the age distribution was relatively unique as we recruited a student sample. For this purpose, we conducted correlation analyses applying the Bravais-Pearson coefficient. We found significant evidence that higher age is associated with a lower acceptance of rainbow usage as a symbol (cor = -.177, p = .015). For the acceptance of purpose marketing (cor = -.117, p = .109) and for the suspicion of rainbow washing (cor = -.0099, p = .8941), we found no significant correlation with age. When differentiating by country, we found no significant correlation between age and the three main questions on purpose marketing, the usage of rainbow symbols and rainbow washing in Germany. This is not surprising, as in the Germany sample, there was almost no spread of age among the respondents, and almost all respondents were relatively young. In the Austrian sample, there was a greater age dispersion. Here, there is a significant negative correlation between age and the assessment of purpose marketing (cor = -.208; sig. = .033) and the usage of rainbow symbols (cor = -.274; sig. = .004). The results suggest that the older the respondents were, the more likely they were to consider both purpose marketing and the usage of rainbow symbols as less relevant. With regard to the estimated percentage of companies applying rainbow washing, no effect of age could be detected in either of the two countries.

With regard to the **course of study** of the respondents, a different picture emerges in both countries (see Table 3): In Germany, it looks as if business & economics (B&E) students are less convinced (lower values) of purpose marketing and also less convinced (lower values) of

rainbow marketing than others (no B&E). However, at the same time, B&E students are more critical with regard to the suspected rainbow washing (higher value). These results are not significant, but this may be due to the relatively small group size of the non-B&E students.

The Austrian sample shows a somewhat different picture. Here, the mean values for both purpose marketing and rainbow usage are very close to each other and do not differ significantly ( $p = .727$ ;  $p = .791$ ). This also does not allow for a real assumption of an effect with the same result and a larger sample. However, the estimate of the rainbow washing differs even more clearly here - and now significantly, those who study B&E suspect a significant ( $p = 0.003$ ) lower proportion of rainbow washing than others. Nevertheless, this finding does not hold when considering both countries (see Table 3).

A clear statement about the direction of the effect of the degree programme is thus not possible, even if the fundamental existence of an effect through this variable is certainly presumable, as is also the case elsewhere with the partial data sets of the present analyses (Mücksch, Nielsen, et al., 2023; Siems et al., 2023).

<i>Statements/Items asked for</i>	<i>Germany</i>		<i>Austria</i>		
	<i>B&amp;E</i>	<i>No B&amp;E</i>	<i>B&amp;E</i>	<i>No B&amp;E</i>	
“Companies/organisations should, in principle, actively participate in political discourse.”	2.91 (n = 67)	3.67 (n = 15)	3.20 (n = 88)	3.09 (n = 22)	<b>Studies:</b> $F(1, 190) = .777$ , $p = .379$
“I think it’s good that many companies use the rainbow as a symbol.”	2.91 (n = 67)	3.53 (n = 15)	3.09 (n = 88)	3.18 (n = 22)	<b>Studies:</b> $F(1, 190) = 1.323$ , $p = .252$
“I suspect that ___ % of companies using the rainbow as a symbol are using it without real conviction.”	64.19% (n = 64)	59.27% (n = 15)	63.98% (n = 84)	76.36% (n = 22)	<b>Studies:</b> $F(1, 183) = 1.463$ , $p = .228$

*Table 3: Results (mean values) separated by degree programme (B&E yes/no)*

#### **4. Summary, Implications, Limitations, Outlook**

As a summary, we see the following answers to our research questions: It becomes clear that the topic of purpose marketing and communication of LGBT symbols is relevant for the target groups – but not for all target groups to the same extent. Interestingly, the main differences cannot be observed between countries, but between women and men. With regard to the main topics (perception of purpose marketing and rainbow marketing), both European countries deliver almost similar results.

Additionally, in the way purpose marketing and LGBT symbols are communicated by companies today, it is obviously not yet convincing or, in some cases, fundamentally rejected. The extent to which the respondents in both studies suspect rainbow washing is alarmingly high.

For this reason, it is clearly an important challenge for companies to be more convincing in the future. In concrete terms, this can only mean that truly honest purpose marketing must be actually lived throughout the company. Planning to use the rainbow in communications or commissioning LGBT symbols as a communication campaign cannot be regarded as sufficient and leads to the suspicion of rainbow washing. Of course, this means that companies have to



consistently accept the rejecting attitudes of individuals regarding LGBT equality. A complete renunciation of a purpose or a strategy for LGBT equality is not an option since a renunciation of a statement is equivalent to a statement - and is likely to cause even greater reactions (Johns et al., 2022).

Moreover, practical implications can be drawn from the gender differences observed. First, as men on average perceive LGBT symbols more negatively, it makes sense for companies to apply more implicit LGBT symbols when advertising goods or services which are mainly used by men. On the other hand, more explicit LGBT symbols can be applied for goods or services targeted at women (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Second, as the use of LGBT symbols appears to have a more positive effect on women, corresponding communication could focus specifically on women as innovators. These innovators may attract a mainly male target group (imitators). This application of the Bass model (Bass, 1969) can be seen in Figure 1 in the appendix.

The topic area still shows great potential for the future for practice and research as well. This also includes unanswered questions and existing limitations in the present contribution. For example, the present study focused on a student sample. It would be of particular interest to find out how other target groups differ in their opinions. From existing literature, it is known that individuals experiencing higher education tend to have more liberal attitudes concerning LGBT equality (la Roi & Mandemakers, 2018; van den Akker et al., 2013). The latter also applies to the cross-national consideration: the two countries considered are culturally very similar, but despite the possible global similarities mentioned above, there may be completely different results in different parts of Europe. For instance, LGBT acceptance is lower in Eastern Europe (Wilson, 2020).

The question of where the reasons lie for the very heterogeneous views on purpose marketing and rainbow marketing remains relatively open. Here, it would be exciting to conduct (especially qualitative) studies that are not limited to criteria such as gender or the field of studies but also take a closer look at the psychosocial characteristics and motives behind the opinions. Such findings could support companies even more in finding the right path for successful purpose marketing and LGBT-sensitive communication. And possibly, as Porter and Kramer (2019) called for, this helps companies to make an even greater contribution to solving the world's social problems.

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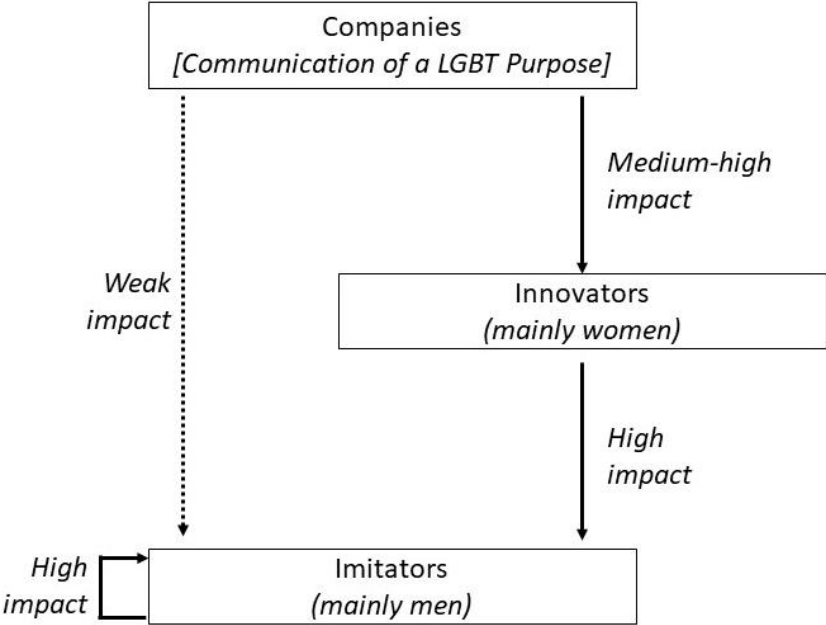
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**Appendix**



*Figure 1: Application of the Bass model on the perception of LGBT symbols among men and women.*