Focusing on the Purpose Marketing Trend: Bridging Political Science for Theoretical Advancements and Strategic Optimization

Abstract

Marketing has evolved continuously, with each era marked by distinctive paradigms and approaches. In the last decade, purpose marketing has emerged as a prominent marketing approach. In purpose marketing, companies define socio-political purposes in conjunction with taking explicit socio-political stances and engaging in corresponding activities. However, as marketing sub-fields have evolved, the incorporation of theories from neighboring disciplines, particularly political science, remains underexplored.

This paper explores the interdisciplinary potential of integrating political theories into purpose marketing. Notably, the political marketing of candidates and projects has a well-established presence, but the translation of political science theories into strategic marketing remains largely untapped. Given the socio-political nature of purpose marketing, such integration becomes increasingly pertinent.

Ultimately, this interdisciplinary exploration seeks to enhance the understanding of the modes of action underlying purpose marketing strategies, offering fresh insights and avenues for further research. This endeavor holds promise in shaping the future of purpose marketing by solidifying its theoretical underpinnings and refining its practical applications.

Keywords: purpose marketing, political theories, political science

1 Introduction: Marketing Interdisciplinarity and Development of Purpose Marketing

Marketing has evolved continuously over the past decades (Caywood et al., 1991; Homburg et al., 2013; Meffert et al., 2019), not least because its interdisciplinary character results in connections to many other disciplines. For example, with the evolution of professional marketing in the 1950s and the main focus on simply selling products, psychology proved to be an important neighboring discipline. Psychology provided explanations for the buying behavior of customers and thus also possible levers for marketing — from "classics" such as Maslow's theory of motivation to Pavlov's dog. The resulting sub-discipline of marketing called "consumer behavior" is now established worldwide in both academia and practice (Blythe, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Solomon, 2019).

In the 1990s, a new form of marketing emerged from service and industrial marketing: relationship marketing (Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 1987; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2002). The focus was now not only on the (short-term) acquisition of stakeholders, especially customers, but also on the ongoing management of a corresponding long-term relationship (see e.g., Bruhn, 2022). For the theoretical foundations of this new approach, neighboring disciplines like **sociology** and insights from the field of **psychology** could again be successfully consulted. Examples of theories that have been successfully transferred to (relationship) marketing are the social penetration theory (Bruhn, 2022, p. 45) and the theory of the effect of stress on the evaluation of other people ("theory of excitation transfer", Papen et al., 2019). Theories on private long-distance relationships have also been transferred to business relationships ("Long-distance management", Pilny & Siems, 2019).

As can be seen, using proven theories from longer-established sciences on which some aspects of the respective marketing sub-topics are based has been common practice until now (Hunt et

al., 2022; Key et al., 2020). Since the 2010s, there has been a new development in marketing that has become even more relevant because of the crises of recent years: **purpose marketing** (Brendel, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2020; Mücksch et al., 2023). The core idea here is that companies define socio-political purposes for themselves in addition to the purpose of making a profit and, in connection with this, take an explicit socio-political stance and/or engage in concrete socio-political activities. In contrast to earlier concepts such as, in particular, corporate social responsibility, the purpose is superordinate to the entire company and not just one of the tasks of, for example, a specialist department (Bruce & Jeromin, 2020, p. 2; Hollensbe et al., 2014, p. 1232).

In this article, the scientific field of **politics** is specifically highlighted. In the marketing of candidates and political projects, in particular, marketing strategies are already used as part of political marketing (Butler & Harris, 2009; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015; Wring, 1997). However, to the authors' knowledge, theories from political science have rarely been used in the field of strategic marketing. Because of the way purpose marketing is understood here in terms of socio-political intervention, this scientific field is, by definition, particularly relevant.

Thus, focusing on the concept of purpose marketing, many questions remain unanswered, especially with regard to the acceptance of the target groups and the further optimization of the corresponding instruments, as it is still a very new discipline. Since, as briefly shown above, the use of existing theories and findings from neighboring disciplines has proved successful in earlier phases of marketing, the question arises of whether an interdisciplinary approach can contribute to the theoretical foundation and thus the practical optimization of this still young sub-field.

In the following, selected political theories are presented and their possible implications for purpose marketing are discussed. Because of space limitations, the focus will be on a few selected theories (chapter 2). Special emphasis is placed on the theory of soft power. The paper concludes with a brief summary and outlook (chapter 3).

2 Discussion of the Potential Relevance of Selected Political Theories for Purpose Marketing

2.1 "Theory of Soft Power" by Joseph Nye (1990)

The **theory of soft power** refers to how countries use their attractiveness and persuasiveness to convince individuals, institutions, other countries, and so on, to share their values and goals (Nye, 1990, 2004). Specifically, this theory states that the ability to influence and shape political preferences, as opposed to the exercise of power based on economic or military incentives or threats (so-called hard power), is closely tied to intangible values (Nye, 1990, 2004). It is crucial that these **values are attractive and shared**. Nye (1990, p. 166) summarizes this important distinction as follows: "This second aspect of power – which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants – might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants." A meaningful combination of soft and hard power is called "smart power" (Nye, 2004), and means the exercise of power by coercion on the one hand and persuasion on the other.

According to its inventor, this theory is also **interesting for businesses** (Nye, 2022): "Firms, universities, foundations, churches, and protest movements develop soft power of their own."

In times of diffusion and transition, in particular, and when globalization and the information age are changing the nature and distribution of power, corporations and other institutions are gaining more power in the world (Nye, 2011). Sölter and Schulze (2010) share a similar perspective and see the theory as being applicable in the area of management strategy. In their view, soft power is a valuable complement to traditional "hard" metrics in business management. Additionally, Nye (2008) discusses soft power theory as a leadership approach, emphasizing that effective leaders should use both hard and soft power tools when interacting with their employees.

However, the theory also allows a direct attempt to draw a concrete analogy that may be of interest for purpose marketing; see Figure 1.

	Political science	**Transfer to business administration/(purpose) marketing**
Actors	States/countries/institutions	Companies/organizations
Aim	Influencing other countries, institutions, people	Influencing stakeholders such as customers or employees
Soft power	Intangible **values** that attract and are shared	Intangible values that attract and are shared in the context of purpose communication
	Culture encompasses the values and practices of a society that create a relationship of action and obligation in the common interest and increase the likelihood of achieving goals	Communicating and living a culture, in the context of purpose marketing, that embraces the values and actions of a company that create a sense of shared purpose and obligation
	Policies, both domestic and international, have an impact that is context-dependent and has the potential to enhance or undermine a nation's soft power in both the short and the long term	A company's actions and practices related to its purpose marketing strategy
Hard power	Military, economic incentives, threat	Contracts, economic incentives (for customers: price; for employees: salary), communication to create fear

Figure 1: Attempt at an Analogy between "Soft Power" and (Purpose) Marketing

Using this analogy, we can derive several theses for purpose marketing. First, we can derive an overarching thesis: purpose marketing could be or become the **soft power approach to marketing**.

Nye (2004) also provides possible starting points for soft power management — and thus possibly also for (political) content or purpose marketing. He sees culture, political values such as democracy and human rights, and policies as the **central sources of soft power** (Nye, 2004, pp. 11). For marketing management, one could try to find analogous pillars and thus starting points for the successful implementation of such a purpose marketing strategy — that is, for the success of purpose marketing. In the context of policies as a source of power, a comparable analogy arises in the realm of corporate practices within the framework of purpose marketing. This domain encompasses concepts that have been explored in previous research, such as CSR (corporate social responsibility), CPA (corporate political advocacy), and brand activism, all of which involve concrete actions through which organizations advocate and take stances on

socio-political issues (Klostermann et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Weber et al., 2023). In addition, Nye (2004, p. 6) emphasizes that, especially in the case of policies, it is imperative that the policy be perceived as legitimate and morally authoritative in order to have a positive impact.

Further theses can be derived from the critical discussion of the soft power approach in politics — and in some cases (possible) insights for purpose marketing can be gained directly. For example, Metz and Seeßlen (2022) state that: "**Soft power must not lead to new divisions**, e.g., in such a way that one part of society is receptive to the role models and values, while the other part perceives it all as a slight or paternalism" (author's translation, Metz & Seeßlen, 2022). This warning may also apply to purpose marketing, which can be similarly polarizing. For example, several studies have already shown that there can be a mismatch between the values and attitudes of a company and those of its customers on socio-political issues, which can result in negative consequences for the brand (Key et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Nye (2004, 2011) provides another concrete and possibly transferable approach from soft power theory to purpose marketing: to achieve effectiveness, soft power is about **competing to tell the best story**. Following this, the central importance of persuasive **content marketing**, which has also become much more important in marketing in recent years (Lou et al., 2019; Lou & Xie, 2021), becomes clear for purpose marketing. In terms of influence, the **credibility of the content** is crucial, a point emphasized by Nye (2011, p. 104), who highlights the dangers of propaganda. In this context, parallels can be drawn with the phenomenon of "washing", which is closely related to the concept of purpose marketing. Washing is defined as "the successful use of a false […] claim to improve a company's competitive standing" (Pope & Wæraas, 2016, p. 175). If companies want to generate soft power in the form of attractiveness with the help of purposeful marketing measures, they must pay particular attention to credibility. This is because inaccurate representations, untruths and similar practices in connection with the communicated purpose can have serious negative effects on the perception and reputation of the brand (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

A central question that will also affect the application of the theory in (purpose) marketing is the **measurability of soft power**. In this context, it is already clear in political science research that there is no strict distinction in practice between types of behavior in terms of hard and soft power (Bakalov, 2019, p. 135). Rather, there is a bipolar spectrum of behavior in terms of more or less hard/soft power, as already suggested by the founder of the theory, Nye (2004, p. 7). Another challenge for the empirical verifiability of soft power is that its origin or emergence tends to be ambiguous. Again, Nye (2004) points out that, while it is possible to assume which resources are more likely to be instruments of hard or soft power, it is not always possible to assign them clearly: "Soft-power resources tend to be associated with the co-optive end of the spectrum of behavior, whereas hard-power resources are usually associated with command behavior. But the relationship is imperfect. For example, sometimes countries may be attracted to others with command power by myths of invincibility, and command power may sometimes be used to establish institutions that later become regarded as legitimate. A strong economy not only provides resources for sanctions and payments, but can also be a source of attractiveness" (Nye, 2004, p. 7). Similarly, it is difficult to establish causal relationships between purpose marketing initiatives and business success because of the many factors at play. Nevertheless, researching the effectiveness of purpose marketing is critical for companies that want to be socially responsible.

2.2 The "Two-Level Game Theory" of Robert Putnam (1988)

The two-level game theory of Putnam (1988) describes a **model of international bargaining** in which policymakers operate simultaneously at two levels: at the domestic (national) level to gain support and approval from domestic politicians and interest groups, and at the international level to reach agreements with other countries. Putnam (1988) emphasizes that a negotiator's ability to operate successfully at both levels is critical, because decisions made at the international level are often influenced by domestic political factors, and the outcome of international negotiations can affect the negotiator's reputation at the domestic level, as he must discuss domestically whether to ratify the results. This model emphasizes the complex interactions between domestic politics and international relations, highlighting how domestic interests and international commitments are intertwined. One level can thus be used for negotiations on the other level — for example, by explaining to an international negotiating partner the negotiating restrictions that one is under as a result of domestic pressures (Putnam, 1988, p. 440).

As a possible analogy for purpose marketing, the national level could be seen as the **internal perspective** of a company, and thus the management of and communication with the stakeholder group of employees in particular, while the international level then corresponds to the **external view**, that is, the view of the stakeholder group of customers. The model can be extended (following similar considerations in relationship marketing, see Bruhn, 2022, p. 12) to other stakeholder groups such as suppliers. Following this line of thought, it becomes clear that purpose marketing, in particular, has to pay attention to several stakeholder groups — internal and external — at the same time and, above all, can have positive effects on the communication between and about other stakeholder groups.

Even if approaches to this are already known from (general) marketing practice (e.g. explaining one's own situation to the negotiating partner in B2B (business-to-business) negotiations, or explaining the relevance of the target group of employees in communication with the customer in the case of services, see Ahearne et al., 2019; Atefi et al., 2020), the model explicitly encourages companies to think about complex interactions in communication with stakeholder groups, especially for purpose marketing, and to use game-theoretical considerations here if necessary.

2.3 Political Legitimacy and Political Representation

In political science, **legitimacy** describes the moral and political justification for decisions, for example in the form of rules and requirements in relation to the population (Schmelzle, 2015). Legitimacy is perceived by society as, among other things, a sense of duty or attitude towards the institution that is considered legitimate, so that its requirements are seen as acceptable, permissible and/or justified and are complied with (Risse & Stollenwerk, 2018; Schmelzle, 2015). Another common concept in political science is **representation**, which is distinguished in different approaches (Pitkin, 1967). Two of them can be applied by analogy to the corporate context. On the one hand, symbolic representation refers to the way in which the represented, from their own perspective, are represented by the institution. Here, above all, the acceptance of the representative is regarded as a central issue. On the other hand, in terms of substantive representation, the actions and activities of the institutions are examined in terms of their conformity with the (political) interests of those they represent (Pitkin, 1967).

A possible analogy to purpose marketing can be found in **brand activism**: brand activism is closely related to purpose marketing and refers to a company's commitment to drive social,

political, economic, and environmental change to address today's biggest and most pressing societal challenges and achieve societal improvement (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). This area of research focuses on when and why brand activism is either perceived as positive and authentic or has negative consequences (Chu et al., 2023; Frohne, 2020). One approach to addressing these challenges could be for brands to analyze their legitimacy and representation among their customers and in society at large, to ensure that their goals and activism are perceived as appropriate and acceptable. Surveys of customer attitudes toward brands' political activism, or analysis of social media posts and comments, can help. Brands could also involve political actors or stakeholders in their decision-making processes to ensure that their goals and activism are aligned with their customers' interests and needs.

The analogy in purpose marketing — and especially to its acceptance — is obvious. Above all, this analogy could produce an argument in favor of taking a closer look at (customer) perceived legitimacy, that is, first explaining (empirically) how it comes about and, if necessary, in a second step — similar to approaches to the topic of customer satisfaction (Bruhn, 2022, p. 289) — measuring it at regular intervals (with a "legitimacy score" analogous to the "customer satisfaction scores" that have been common up to now), viewing it as a control variable of purpose marketing. The much-quoted statement of Peter Drucker probably also applies to purpose marketing: "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it" (Drucker, 2015).

3   Conclusion and Outlook

As we have seen, political science theories offer a number of possibilities for providing a theoretical grounding to the relatively new approach of purpose marketing and, above all, for optimizing its application. Figure 2 summarizes the most important findings, based on the theories considered in the current paper.

Theory/Concept	Central statement of the theory	Key insights for purpose marketing
Soft Power Theory	A country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or rewards	• Strengthen customer loyalty by communicating values that are shared by the target audience. • Soft power principles can be integrated into content marketing and communication strategies to convey the brand message in the sense of purpose marketing. • Communicate values and actions (in terms of policies), and live a culture that is attractive to the target audience.
Two-Level Game Theory	Simultaneously bargaining at two levels: national and international	• Consideration of internal views and opinions (employees) and comparison with external values (customers). • Negotiation between two points of view with open communication of constraints.
Political Legitimacy and Political Representation	The moral and political justification of decisions (legitimacy);	• Active and mutual exchange between the company and its stakeholders about its purpose.

	How political decisions are made on behalf of people (representation)	• Obtaining and taking into account feedback on the various measures (e.g., in terms of communication) that are taken as part of purpose marketing.

Figure 2: Purpose marketing – Lessons learned from political science

For most of the approaches shown, a valuable next step could be the derivation or **concretization of hypotheses** and, if necessary, an **empirical investigation** of the effectiveness in purpose marketing. On the one hand, one could follow the approach of the two-level game theory and examine the perception of and, in particular, compare various socio-political marketing measures from different perspectives (internal employees; external customers). On the other hand, the theory of soft power offers the potential to try to identify purpose marketing measures analogous to the sources of power from the theory, to measure their individual effects, and to classify them in terms of their effectiveness.

Overall, this paper has looked at examples of very important political science theories that have the potential to be transferred to purpose marketing. At the same time, several other **political science topics** not discussed in the context of this paper can be used to test whether the existing knowledge is transferable to purpose marketing. Concrete (further) phenomena in (political) purpose marketing, for which theories from political science may exist, could be: the handling of minority opinions, the opportunities and risks of populist communication, success factors of political communication, dealing with political disenchantment, and so on.

It would also be interesting to include **other stakeholders** — especially employees — in addition to customers: purpose marketing can only succeed when there is company-wide implementation (Bruce & Jeromin, 2020). Moreover, by analogy to relationship marketing (Bruhn, 2022, p. 12), it can be assumed that many of the approaches can also be used to manage relationships with human target groups — and thus with customers and employees.

Overall, the field shows **great potential** for further theoretical grounding and optimization of purpose marketing in both academia and practice. With this paper, we hope to have made a contribution to this still very new and not yet widely researched trending topic in marketing, in order to create a basis for understanding the mechanisms of action and points of contact.

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