Acceptance Differences Across Various Purpose Marketing Topics: Theory, Empirical Study Results Among Young Target Groups, and Implications

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Abstract
Purpose Marketing has lately emerged as a new trend in both research and practice. A rising number of companies are taking a stance on a variety of socio-political topics. This paper examines different perceptions of purpose marketing among young target groups in Germany, specifically focusing on the agreement with varying purpose marketing topics. An empirical study with 179 respondents revealed significant differences in the acceptance of purpose marketing based on eleven topics. Topics like environmental and climate protection, social justice, and healthy lifestyle received positive responses, while political topics, such as election campaigns, politicians and political parties, were generally viewed negatively. Moreover, our findings indicate that women generally show greater agreement with most of the purpose marketing topics, while men tend to have a much more critical view on purpose marketing rejecting most of the purpose topics completely. Our findings suggest that companies must carefully consider their purpose marketing strategies while acknowledging the diverse perspectives of their target audience.

Keywords: Purpose Marketing, Purpose Topics, Agreement

1 Purpose Marketing: Theoretical Background and Research Question

In recent years, there has been a trend for more and more companies to take a socio-political stance, usually referred to as "**purpose marketing**" (Brendel, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2020; Frohne, 2020; C. Schmidt & Siems, 2024). In the brand community the term "brand activism" is also used in a similar way (Sakar & Kotler, 2021; H. J. Schmidt et al., 2022) – usually concretized to the fact that the purposes are not yet fully assessed.

As an example, an interview with Kristina Bulle from Procter & Gamble underlines how purpose marketing is seen in practice: "Procter & Gamble wants to focus on three areas with its attitude-driven projects: Sustainability, social justice and equality and inclusion" (Campillo-Lundbeck, 2022, p. 3, translated from German). She adds that discussions about values naturally change, and with them the way in which companies address values: "However, this is also a process of constant change: Much of what was relevant as a social debate ten years ago has now been clarified. But new themes are emerging. (...) But the specific things you are fighting for can certainly change. And this can give rise to topics that are perfectly suited to brands that may not yet have much communication around their brand attitude" (Campillo-Lundbeck, 2022, p. 3, translated from German).

This example illustrates how broad (and potentially volatile) the range of topics that purpose marketing can cover in practice may be. At the same time, current scientific studies indicate that purpose marketing is not consistently perceived positively by all target audiences (Mücksch et al., 2024; C. Schmidt & Siems, 2024). These considerations raise the question of whether the choice of area and topic also influence the acceptance or non-acceptance of purpose marketing.

This article presents the findings of an empirical study conducted as part of a student project in Germany in 2024. The objective of the study was to examine how different purpose topics are perceived by young target groups. Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of the study's methodology and presents the results, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for research and practice, along with a consideration of the limitations of the study and an outlook for future research.

2 Results of an Empirical Study on Young Target Groups

In a first step, a subdivision of possible **thematic purpose content** into eleven categories was carried out, based in particular on previous purpose marketing measures in practice and, where available, corresponding publications (e.g., Bruce & Jeromin, 2020; Campillo-Lundbeck, 2022, 2022; Frohne, 2020; Mücksch et al., 2023, 2024; Rentz, 2020; C. Schmidt & Siems, 2024; Tielich, 2022; Unckrich, 2020, 2021a, 2021b), as well as taking into account established schemes for subdivisions such as the UN's sustainability goals (United Nations [UN], 2024): Environment and climate protection, social justice, healthy lifestyle, economic issues, humanitarian catastrophes, public health prevention, social diversity, war and armed conflicts, political parties, politicians and election campaigns.

These items formed the central basis for the online questionnaire, in which the respondents were then asked: 'How do you feel about companies taking a stance on the following topics?' (Scale, -3, -2, -1, 0, +1, +2, +3, with -3 = very bad, +3 = very good).

After a pretest (N = 10) and optimization of the questionnaire based on the pretest, the questionnaire was distributed to the target group (people aged between 16 and 30) via private social media and other channels. A total of 186 questionnaires were retrieved, of which seven were excluded. This left a total of 179 valid questionnaires. The characteristics of the sample in terms of age and gender are illustrated in Figure 1. 35,8% of respondents studied economics, 64,2% did not. Figure 2 displays the actual results for the research question of how different purpose content is perceived by young target groups.

As expected, the results indicate that there are **differences in the acceptance of purpose marketing** among the target group analyzed, **depending on the topic**. A significance test (t-test) confirms this finding, at least across more than one category: if we compare (overall mean, no longer differentiated by gender) of neighboring categories (e.g., 'environment and climate protection' and 'social justice', etc.), these differences are mostly not significant ($< .05$). However, if we take not the next but the one after as a benchmark (e.g., 'environmental and climate protection' compared to 'healthy lifestyle'), the difference is significant ($< .05$).

Furthermore, it can be observed that on average an **overall positive perception** of certain topics predominates among the target groups surveyed (environmental and climate protection, social justice, healthy lifestyles, public health prevention, humanitarian disasters, social diversity). In contrast, the average overall perception of other purpose topics relating specifically to organized politics/politics (political parties, politicians, election campaigns) tends to be negative. A positive or negative average impression could not be clearly determined for the topic of 'wars and armed conflicts'.

The analysis of the absolute frequencies for each individual question suggests more **differentiates issue** (Figure 3): The mean value close to zero for 'wars and armed conflicts' results on the one hand from a generally frequently expressed neutral (scale value: 0) or relatively neutral (scale values: -1 and 1) perception, but also from polarizing opinions (scale values: -2, -3, 2, 3). The fact that other aspects are also assessed with tendencies, but nevertheless also heterogeneously/controversially, is shown by the two further detailed analyses in Figure 3 as well as the variances of all aspects analyzed presented in Table 1.

The partly existing heterogeneity of the answers raises the question as to how exactly the market segments differ. Statistical analyses (t-tests for independent samples, Table 2 and Table 3) on the surveyed variables of gender and study program revealed the following: While no gender differences concerning the topics humanitarian catastrophes, war and armed conflicts and two of the three political topics (political parties and politicians) can be observed, on average, women have a higher level of agreement with most of the topics, shown in higher mean values, such as 'environment and climate protection' ($p = .002$), 'social justice' ($p < .001$), 'healthy lifestyle' ($p < .001$, 'public health prevention'($p = .001$), diversity ($p < .001$) and have a less negative view on the topic 'election campaigns' ($p = .001$). These findings for differences in perception of purpose marketing confirm the results of previous studies. For example, Mücksch et al. (2024) found that, in general, women tend to have a more positive perception of purpose marketing. With regard to the differences in the study program, however, differences in the agreement with companies taking a stance on three of the topics are found. On average, business-administration students are less critical with the topics 'war and armed conflicts', 'politicians' and 'election campaigns'. Apart from that, no differences can be observed.

Interestingly, despite the relatively homogeneous target group in terms of **age**, smaller age effects were detectable within this target group: A correlation analysis according to Bravais-Pearson (r_{BP}) revealed that, in principle, several topics are viewed more critically/negatively with increasing age of the respondents, specifically the topic environment and climate protection ($r_{BP} = -.304$, sig. $< .001$), the topic diversity ($r_{BP} = .237$, sig. $= .001$), the topic social justice ($r_{BP} = -.208$, sig. $= .005$) and the topic healthy lifestyle ($r_{BP} = -.194$, sig. $= .009$). Table 4 illustrates the age effect in the form of a contingency table for the variable 'environment and climate protection'.

A noteworthy outcome was also identified through a cluster analysis, which was conducted using a hierarchical cluster analysis with squared Euclidean distances as the distance measure and Average Linkage as the fusion method: In accordance with the Ellbow-criterion, a five-cluster solution is especially promising in this case, although three clusters turn out to be one-person clusters. However, the remaining two clusters, comprising 137 and 39 respondents,

respectively, represent specific market segments that could be identified through this approach. Group 1, comprising 137 respondents, exhibits an above-average positive attitude towards the majority of topics, with the exception of political topics as a part of purpose marketing, which are rejected, as previously stated. Group 2 (40 respondents), on the other hand, is fundamentally critical of purpose marketing, does not find most topics (apart from economic issues) really positive (mean values close to zero) and specifically finds the topics of diversity (-1.67) and political topics (values below -2) recognizably negative. The mean values of both groups are given in Figure 6, from which it can be deduced that around 1/3 of respondents generally view purpose marketing more critically - and are particularly characterized by the fact that diversity topics in particular are viewed much more negatively compared to other respondents. Both groups differ clearly and significantly by gender (Group 1 comprises 38.7% men, group 2 comprises 74.4% men, t-test with the binary-coded variable gender significant at $p < .01$), but not by study program (Group 1: non-business-administration studies 64.2%; group 2: non-business-administrations studies 64.1%).

3. Implications, Limitations, Outlook

The study demonstrates that, depending on which topic is addressed with purpose marketing, its acceptance can vary considerably and, in some cases, is even rejected completely. The analysis of the target group revealed a tendency to respond positively to themes related to environment and climate protection, social justice, and healthy lifestyles. In contrast, the study reveals a more negative response to political content, such as political parties, politicians, and election campaigns. For several of the topics mentioned, there are also more or less large differences in opinions, which depend on gender, but in some cases also on age and study program. We suggest that these differences may result from psychographic differences. For example, these psychographic differences may be reflected in the choice of study program and business students may generally have a greater openness towards links between societal relevant issues and economic topics. Finally, purpose-opponents not only differ in their fundamental skepticism towards all issues but, unlike others, explicitly reject diversity as an issue and are disproportionately often male.

We believe that the following implications can be derived for business practice: Companies that engage in purpose marketing should be aware that not **every target group** will perceive this positively and that the chosen topic will also have an influence. Therefore, companies should be very careful with purpose communication when it comes to topics that have been identified as critical. In this study, across all respondents, these are clearly topics related to politics Companies that want to engage in purpose marketing may consider that taking a stance on current election campaigns, politicians or political parties may cause negative reactions and lead to rejection. This does not mean that - depending on the industry and situation - such strategies may not be useful and necessary, but only that a high level of **sensitivity** towards the target groups is important here.

From our point of view, caution in dealing with potentially more critical topics should not lead to companies deliberately 'choosing' topics that have the most positive effect possible: Previous studies (e.g., Mücksch et al., 2024) have shown the credibility of such measures to be a decisive factor for success or, if ignored, may lead to failure. Less may sometimes be more here - and in agreement with the existing literature (Bruce & Jeromin, 2020, p. 14ff.; Frohne, 2020, p. 31), a high 'fit' with the values actually practiced by the company is essential.

However, we believe that, being cautious in dealing with potentially more sensitive topics should not lead companies to deliberately 'select' topics that are likely to have a particularly positive effect. Earlier studies (e.g., Mücksch et al., 2024) identified credibility as a critical factor for the success or, if neglected, reason for failure. In this context, less can sometimes be

more. In line with existing literature (Bruce & Jeromin, 2020, pp. 14ff.; Frohne, 2020, p. 31), a strong alignment with values genuinely upheld by the company is indispensable.

At the same time, a major challenge will be to take into account the **heterogeneity of the target groups**. In our opinion, it would be optimal to present an authentic and genuine perspective in a manner that is even acknowledged (or at least respected) by target groups that may hold opposing views.

The aforementioned considerations and the study results have certain **limitations**: Firstly, only a very limited target group was surveyed (**representativeness**). It can clearly be assumed that different results may emerge for other age groups, population groups (non-students) and also in other regions and countries.

Furthermore, in line with the quote from practice mentioned at the beginning, it should be noted that the relevance - and therefore presumably also the acceptance - of socio-political topics will continue to change over time. Specifically, when assessing the topics, it is noticeable that topics that have been part of corporate communication for a long time tend to be accepted more than other. Although it remains unclear in which direction a possible causality may emerge, possible changes over time need to be addressed.

Considering the high relevance of the topic in practice, the limitations illustrate quite great potential for the future. Firstly, concerning the investigation of other target groups apart from students to address the representativeness of the study and - in terms of dynamics - also the investigation of developments over time. Conducting longitudinal research could complement this study's findings by identifying trends in the perception of purpose marketing topics, as well as changes in gender perception differences over time. Besides, it would be insightful to conduct studies that analyze other aspects than those in the present study, for example by examining psychographic characteristics in more detail as possibly relevant influencing factors on the perception of purpose marketing. A possible starting point for the examination could be to assess whether psychographic characteristics such as interpersonal trust, religious beliefs, feelings of social responsibility and control affect attitudes towards different purpose marketing topics in a similar way as they influence attitudes towards cause-related marketing (Youn & Kim, 2008). Moreover, it may be valuable to examine the aspects of content highlighted in this article in more depth, e.g., to use qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, to assess in more detail why men in particular view the topic of diversity in purpose marketing so critically or why political parties are so universally rejected as a purpose topic.

In conclusion, further work is definitely useful for both practitioners and academics in order to further substantiate this relevant new area of marketing both theoretically and empirically. It is hoped that this paper has opened up a new aspect for discussion and thus made a small contribution.

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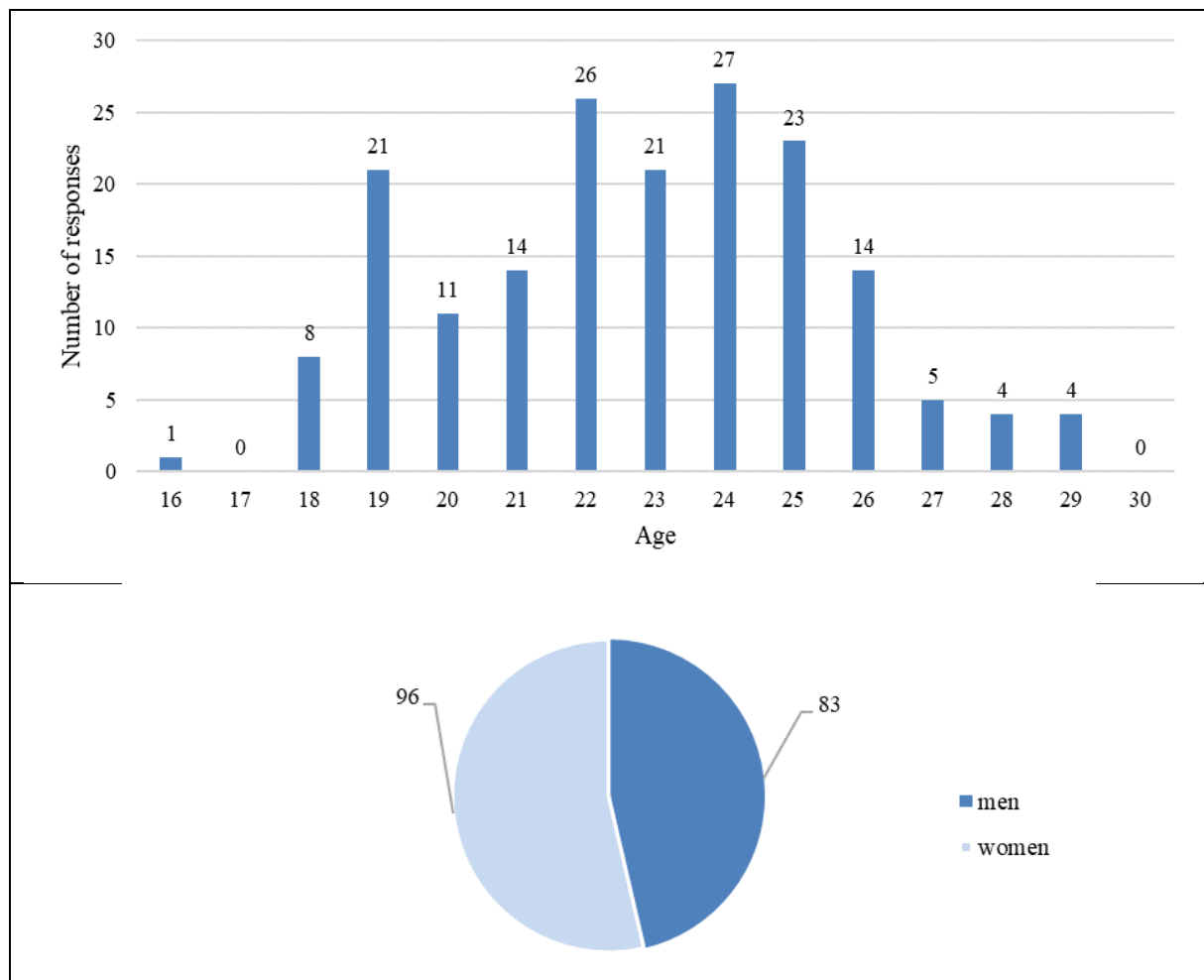
Appendix

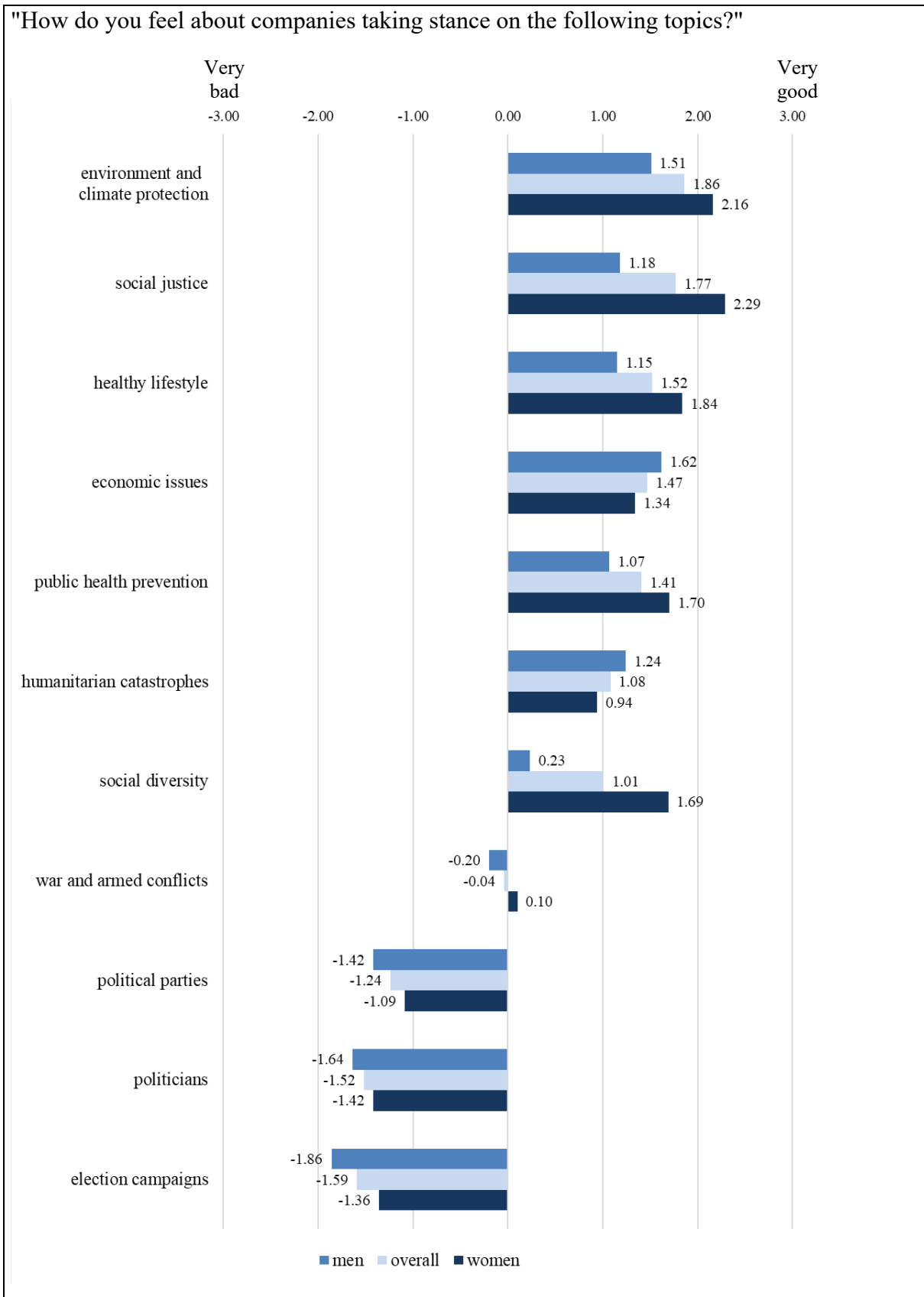**Figure 1:** Sample structure (age and gender)

Figure 2: Mean values of agreement with companies taking stand on the elven purpose topics (by gender), n = 179 Mittelwerte der Zustimmung zur Stellungnahme von Unternehmen bei den abgefragten Themenfeldern (nach Geschlecht); n = 180
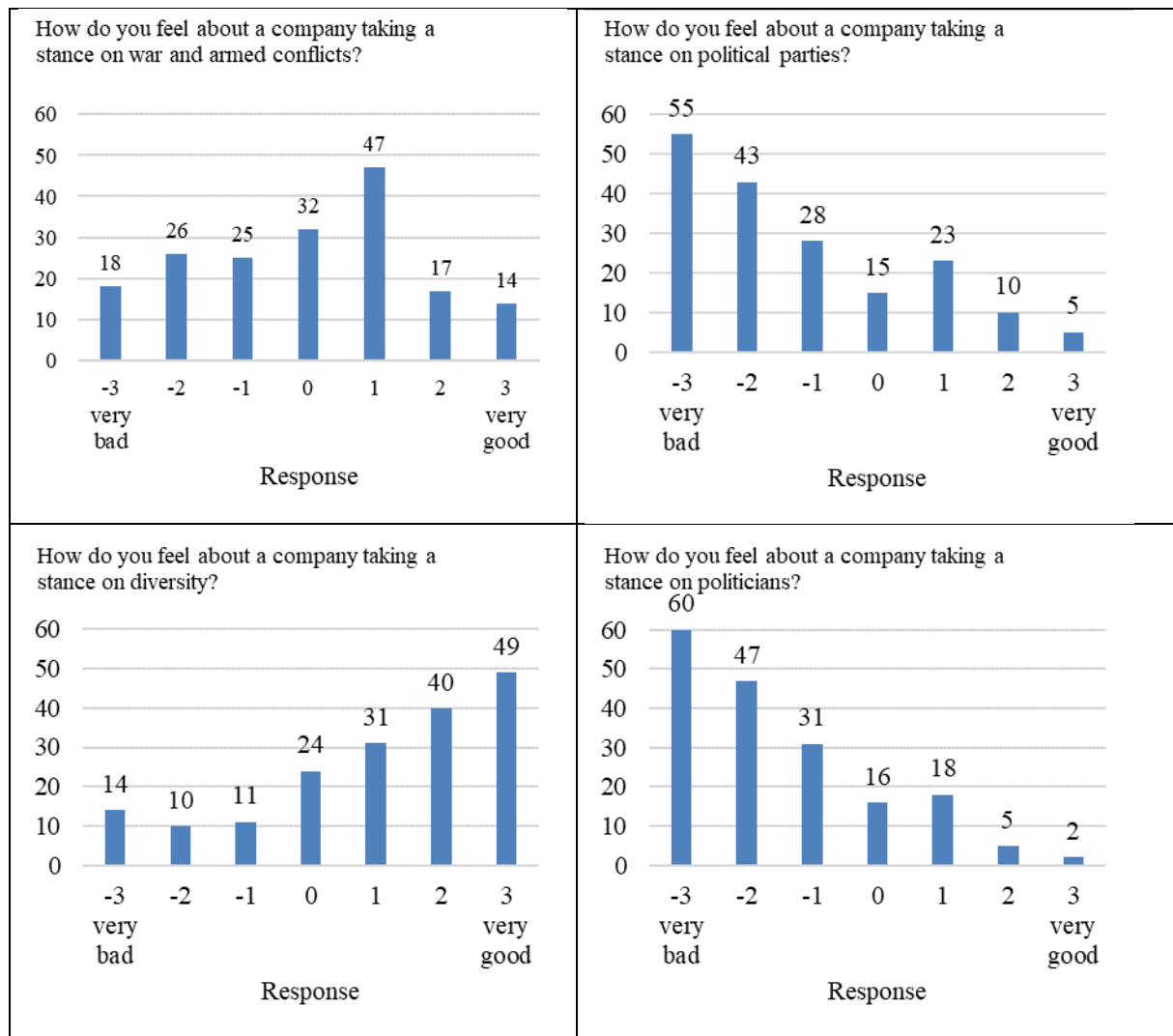
Figure 3: Frequency of agreement with companies taking a stance on a selection of topics; N = 179.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	St.Dev.	Variance
environment and climat protection	179	-3	3	1.877	1.372	1.884
social justice	179	-3	3	1.777	1.475	2.175
healthy lifestyle	179	-2	3	1.514	1.251	1.566
economy	179	-1	3	1.480	1.138	1.296
public health prevention	179	-2	3	1.413	1.284	1.648
humanitarian catastropies	179	-3	3	1.078	1.486	2.207
diversity	179	-3	3	1.034	1.863	3.471
war and armed conflicts	179	-3	3	-0.045	1.728	2.987
political parties	179	-3	3	-1.235	1.726	2.978
politicians	179	-3	3	-1.514	1.508	2.274
election campaigns	179	-3	3	-1.587	1.524	2.323

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on the agreement with companies taking a stance on the eleven topics; N = 179

Item: How do you feel about a company taking a stance on diversity?	Men (N = 83)		Women (N = 96)			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
environment and clime protection	1.55	1.46	2.16	1.23	-2.995	.002
social justice	1.18	1.53	2.29	1.21	-5.321	< .001
healthy lifestyle	1.13	1.27	1.84	1.15	-3.944	< .001
economy	1.64	1.17	1.34	1.09	1.738	.042
humanitarian catastrophies	1.24	1.35	0.94	1.59	1.366	.087
public health prevention	1.08	1.35	1.70	1.15	-3.274	.001
diversity	0.28	1.97	1.69	1.49	-5.334	< .001
war and armed conflicts	-0.22	1.76	0.10	1.70	-1.241	.108
political parties	-1.40	1.62	-1.09	1.81	-1.176	.121
politicians	-1.63	1.45	-1.42	1.55	-0.928	.177
election campaigns	-1.84	1.34	-1.36	1.62	-2.143	.017

Table 2: Results (mean values and standard deviations) by gender

Item: How do you feel about a company taking a stance on diversity?	Business-Adminstration students (N = 115)		Non-Business Administration students (N = 64)			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
environment and clime protection	1.766	1.411	1.939	1.353	-0.810	.210
social justice	1.781	1.408	1.774	1.516	0.032	.487
healthy lifestyle	1.438	1.194	1.557	1.285	-0.609	.272
economic issues	1.656	1.011	1.383	1.196	1.623	.053
humanitarian catastrophies	1.156	1.461	1.035	1.504	0.523	.301
public health prevention	1.375	1.266	1.435	1.299	-0.298	.383
diversity	1.266	1.711	0.904	1.938	1.245	.107
war and armed conflicts	1.281	1.768	-0.226	1.686	1.896	.030
political parties	-0.953	1.741	-1.391	1.705	1.636	.052
politicians	-1.219	1.558	-1.678	1.460	1.970	.025
election campaigns	-1.219	1.713	-1.791	1.373	2.442	.012

Table 3: Results (mean values and standard deviations) by study program

	Response ("How do you feel about a company taking a stance on the environment and climate protection?"							
	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Total
age								
16	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
18	0	0	0	0	0	3	5	8
19	0	0	0	0	4	4	13	21
20	0	0	0	1	3	2	5	11
21	0	0	1	1	2	3	7	14
22	0	0	2	2	4	8	10	26
23	0	0	2	1	3	7	8	21
24	0	0	0	1	6	7	13	27
25	0	1	0	2	4	2	14	23
26	2	2	1	1	3	3	2	14
27	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	5
28	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	4
29	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	4
Total	2	4	8	9	35	40	81	179

Table 4: Contingency Table for the variable 'Agreement environment and climate protection as a topic of purpose marketing' / 'Age'; N = 180

Item: "How do you feel about a company taking a stance on the following topic?"	Cluster 1		Cluster 2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
environment and clime protection	2.336	0.843	0.282	1.685
social justice	2.277	0.976	0.103	1.535
healthy lifestyle	1.708	1.092	0.718	1.450
economy	1.365	1.162	1.897	0.940
humanitarian catastrophies	1.241	1.438	0.487	1.430
public health prevention	1.679	1.137	0.436	1.334
diversity	1.796	1.177	-1.615	1.206
war and armed conflicts	0.234	1.651	-1.103	1.447
political parties	-1.007	1.797	-2.000	1.147
politicians	-1.350	1.589	-2.026	1.063
election campaigns	-1.474	1.563	-2.026	1.112

Table 5: Two-group solution of a cluster analysis (hierarchical cluster analysis with squared Euclidean distances as distance measure and average linkage as fusion method)