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Rainbow Communication and Perceived Washing: Empirical Results from Two European Countries and Extended Implications for a Differentiated Communication Strategy based on the Bass-Model

Abstract

Companies taking a stance in terms of purpose marketing, brand activism, or corporate social advocacy has gained more attention in corporate communication in recent years. Although these terms cannot be considered synonymous, it is evident that more and more companies are using LGBT+ symbols in their communications (“rainbow communication”), 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 contribute to the existing literature on the acceptance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by providing 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. At the same time, the results show that different target groups have (very) different views on it, so a special communication strategy is necessary. This paper builds on an earlier version presented at an international conference, where initial discussions explored how the Bass model, established in another context, could inspire strategies for addressing these challenges. Here, we present an extended perspective on the topic and its management implications.

Keywords

Rainbow communication; rainbow washing; LGBT+; diversity; brand activism purpose marketing

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 subsequently ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR) have emerged 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 et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Within the past ten years, two additional trends can be identified (Mücksch et al., 2023, p. 2): On the one hand, it has become more important in marketing communication and especially in corporate communication that companies explicitly express themselves socio-politically to their customers (‘purpose marketing’, see e. g. Bruce & Jeromin (2020, p. 22); Gartenberg et al. (2019) or similar in an international context ‘brand activism’, see e. g. Klein et al. (2023); Moorman (2020); Vredenburg et al. (2020)). These trends go beyond CSR: CSR refers to voluntary, legally non-mandatory activities through which companies promote social good or mitigate negative impacts, typically as discrete initiatives alongside core business (Drucker, 1981; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). Purpose marketing, by contrast, embeds a socio-political purpose into the entire organization and its ongoing actions (Brendel, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2020; Siems, Rüger, et al., 2025), while brand activism represents a more radical form of purpose marketing in which brands publicly take sides on controversial,

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unresolved socio-political issues (Tressoldi et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). These trends were reinforced by the crises of recent years – the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020, p. 253; Oluwasanmi, 2022, p. 172; Rentz, 2020) and the war against Ukraine (Campillo-Lundbeck, 2022).

On the other hand, an increasingly critical attitude of (potential) customers towards companies can be seen in the fact that "washing" is often suspected in corporate communication. 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, p. 6; Dixon, 2020, p. 2; Pope & Wæraas, 2016, p. 177). Thematically, this goes far beyond the most commonly discussed greenwashing (e.g. Chen & Chang, 2013; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Seele & Gatti, 2017) and today concerns several socio-political issues, such as purple washing (on gender equality) (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022, p. 493). In the last few years, there has been particularly intense discussion on diversity and especially LGBT+ (illustrated by "rainbow") as part of corporate communication, for example, on the occasion of the Men's Football World Cup in Qatar in December 2022 (Sonnenschein, 2022, p. 4). Regarding this football tournament, there has been a debate, especially about the extent to which diversity and specifically corporate communication with the rainbow flag is only a supposed commitment or partial commitment or even washing ("rainbow washing") (Heerdts & Roorda, 2023, p. 25; Rusch, 2023, p. 12).

This is where this article comes in: More and more companies are focussing on the communication of a purpose (Klein et al., 2023, p. 1; Moorman, 2020, p. 388; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444) and LGBT+ symbols (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 395; Ciszek & Pounders, 2020, p. 103; Eisend & Hermann, 2019, p. 380). We refer to the use of LGBT+ symbols in corporate communication, in particular the rainbow, in the following as Rainbow communication. Consequently, and of particular interest to service providers, we formulate the following research questions:

How do target groups perceive the corporate 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. We contribute to the existing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) literature which highlights that the effectiveness of DEI communication hinges on its perceived authenticity and alignment with substantive organizational action (Lewis et al., 2026; Mills Cox, 2026; Ravazzani et al., 2025). Stakeholders increasingly scrutinize DEI messaging for signs of "diversity washing" (i.e., the superficial promotion of DEI values without meaningful change) which can erode trust and provoke backlash (Baker et al., 2024; Gündemir et al., 2024). In order to analyze the research 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.

To ensure conceptual clarity, this study is explicitly positioned within the domain of corporate communication. Corporate communication in a marketing context refers to the totality of an organization's communication activities aimed to shape its institutional image and managing relationships with multiple stakeholder groups, including customers, employees, media, political actors, and society at large (Bruhn, 2025, p. 3; Meffert et al., 2018, p. 312ff). Typical instruments of corporate communication include corporate advertising, corporate public relations, corporate sponsoring, corporate events, and the corporate website (Meffert et al., 2018, p. 269), all of which serve to express the organization's identity and values rather than to directly promote individual products or services (Bruhn, 2025, p. 4).

The structure of this paper is as follows:

First, it briefly shows how the idea of rainbow symbolism emerged and became increasingly relevant for corporate communication, 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 here. We show to what extent a young target group suspects rainbow washing. And we try to present a possible communication strategy based on the in another context established Bass model, which could give useful inspirations for management implications and strategies on this topic.

The Bass model focuses on diffusion processes (Bass, 1969). Within marketing theory, adoption and diffusion processes are situated in product policy and innovation management, where adoption refers to individual-level acceptance and diffusion captures the aggregate spread of an innovation over time (Bruhn, 2024, p. 137ff). The Bass diffusion model is a central integrative diffusion model in this literature and is specifically designed for durable innovations characterized by first-time adoption rather than repeated purchases (Hruschka, 1996, p. 111; Schmalen, 1989, p. 211ff). We argue that this makes the model particularly suitable for DEI initiatives which typically involve long-term organizational change and largely irreversible adoption decisions. By distinguishing between innovation-driven adoption (innovators) and social-influence-driven adoption (imitators), the Bass model enables a dynamic analysis of how DEI practices initially emerge and subsequently spread through imitation.

A first version of this article was presented and discussed at the International Marketing Trends Conference in Venice 2024 (Mücksch et al., 2024) and met with great interest. The present article includes the new knowledge we gained at the conference and we hope that it can contribute to showing the results and (extended) implications to a larger part of the corporate and academic community.

2 Theoretical Background/History: Rainbow and Rainbow Washing in the context of DEI

In general, DEI refers to organizational policies and practices that promote the fair representation, participation, and treatment of individuals from different backgrounds, including but not limited to race, gender, ethnicity, age, ability, and sexual orientation (Agostini et al., 2025; Arsel et al., 2022). In this context, DEI management can be regarded as the strategic integration of these principles into human resources and organizational culture, aiming not only for compliance but also for leveraging diversity to foster innovation and performance (Park et al., 2025). DEI communication encompasses the internal and external messaging through which organizations articulate their DEI commitments, initiatives, and values, engaging stakeholders and shaping perceptions of authenticity and credibility (Mills Cox, 2026; Ravazzani et al., 2025). The rainbow is frequently used as a symbol in DEI communications (Fleischman et al., 2024).

In recent years, the rainbow flag has emerged to an almost ubiquitous symbol for the LGBT+ community (Hauksson-Tresch, 2021, p. 554). It was paramount to its designer, Gilbert Baker, that the new flag would *not* become a registered trademark but remained 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 (Nielsen, 2024, p. 289). 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, p. 528).

In general, companies support or strategically incorporate a range of environmental and social issues (cf. section 1) because such CSR is increasingly in demand by customers and other stakeholders (Melander, 2017, p. 1095) and is required by law (e.g., ESG directive), and communicating CSR may mean a competitive advantage (Frynas, 2015, p. 247).

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 (Pope & Wæraas, 2016, p. 173), or downplay, conceal or even outright lie about the negative consequences (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020, p. 8), a practice known as “washing” (Nielsen, 2023, p. 200). 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, p. 353) or redwashing (Vanclay & Hanna, 2019, p. 18). Diversity washing refers to the practice where organizations claim a commitment to DEI to enhance their market perception, but their actual practices and behaviours do not align with these claims, often benefiting from appearing more socially conscious than they truly are (Baker et al., 2024). Thus, rainbow washing is a company presenting itself as more LGBT+-friendly than it actually is (Ciszek, 2018, p. 142; Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1434).

More and more “rainbow washing” is explicitly part of the discussion in science: For instance, recent literature indicates that members of the LGBT+ community have higher demands on the authenticity and actual implementation of LGBT+ measures in the company (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 243; Tressoldi et al., 2024, p. 62f). Moreover, Ahmad et al. (2024, p. 5f) show that customers perceive a brand and its LGBT+-positive communications as more authentic when the company specifically supports its LGBT+ employees, compared to abstract messages. Therefore, companies should actively support members of the LGBT+ community to avoid rainbow washing (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024, p. 146).

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 reconceptualization 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, p. 248).

The existing research and the results show that the perception of rainbow washing can be a major problem for companies. And there may be big differences between target groups. In the following, we want to examine this specifically for young target groups in two countries - and pay particular attention to possible differences in perception.

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. (2025); Study 2: Siems, Gölzner, et al. (2025)). However, these additional questions were identical in both studies, and the results were not published in Study 1 and Study 2. The items of the study were mainly adapted and adjusted from Mücksch et al. (2023). In addition, several colleagues from different fields were consulted during the questionnaire development process.

Both studies were conducted in June 2023 at university courses in Germany (Study 1) and Austria (Study 2). The two countries were selected because, for practical reasons, they provided access to the target groups. Furthermore, specific characteristics could be easily assessed in both countries. Additionally, two countries within liberal democracies were deliberately chosen because companies are free to position themselves in these countries. In Germany, the questionnaires were distributed

digitally. Study 2 used paper-based questionnaires. Special attention was paid to ensuring that the anonymity of respondents was preserved. Participation was voluntary. As Study 2 was paper-based in Austria, the conduct of this study was additionally supported by the approval of an ethics committee. The following Table 1 provides demographic information on the samples.

	Study 1 (n=82)	Study 2 (n=118)
Country	Germany	Austria
Institution	University of Technology	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 corporate communication in particular. The results are shown in Figure 1.

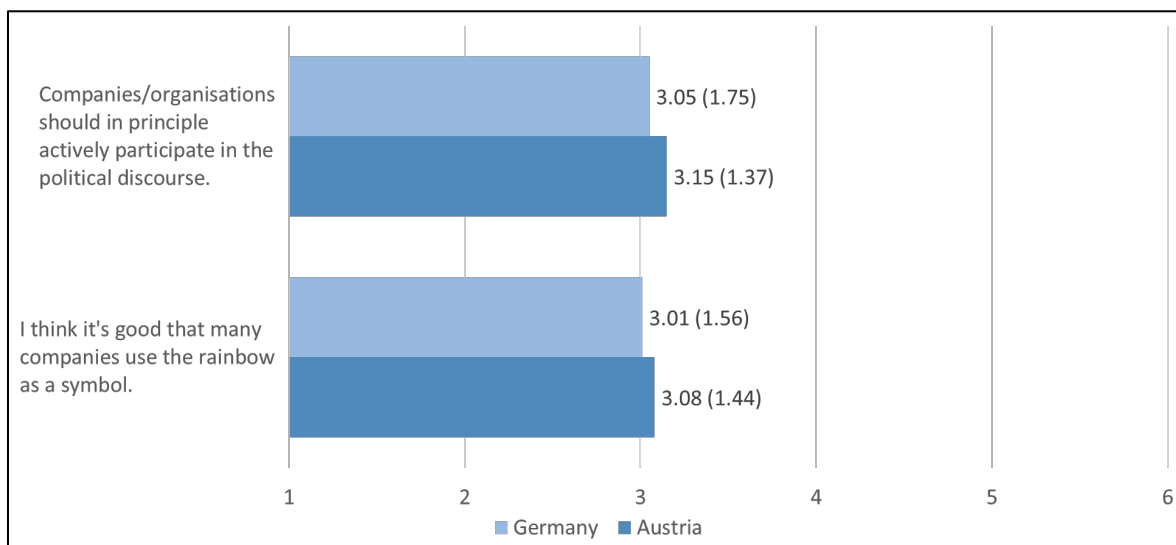


Figure 1. Degree of agreement (1- Disagree; 6 -Agree completely) with a statement on purpose marketing in general and the usage of rainbow symbols by companies in particular (mean values and standard deviations in brackets)

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, p. 19ff).

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 communication 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).

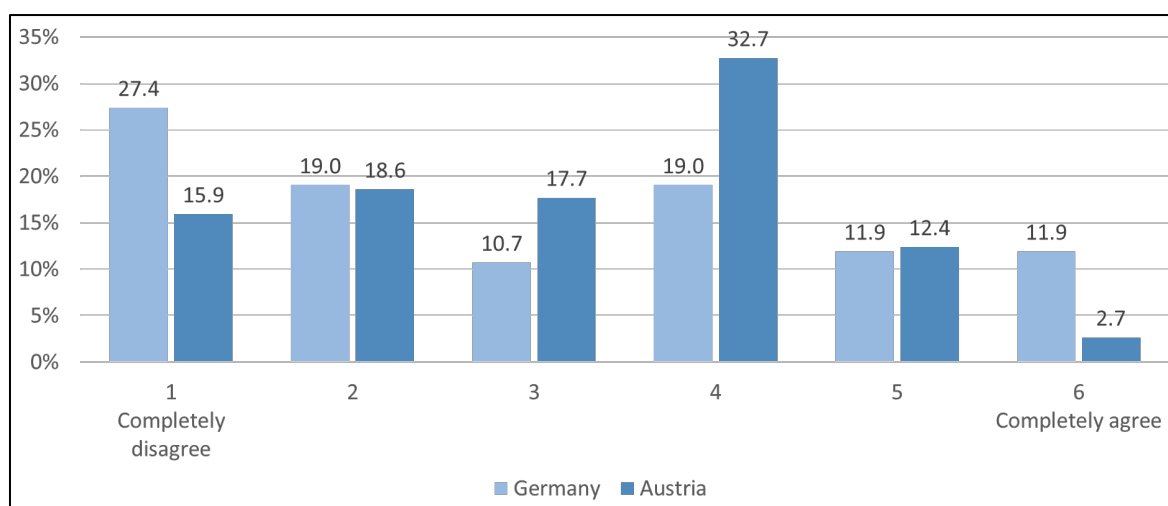


Figure 2a. Level of agreement (1- Disagree; 6 -Agree completely) on whether companies should participate in the political discourse

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%).

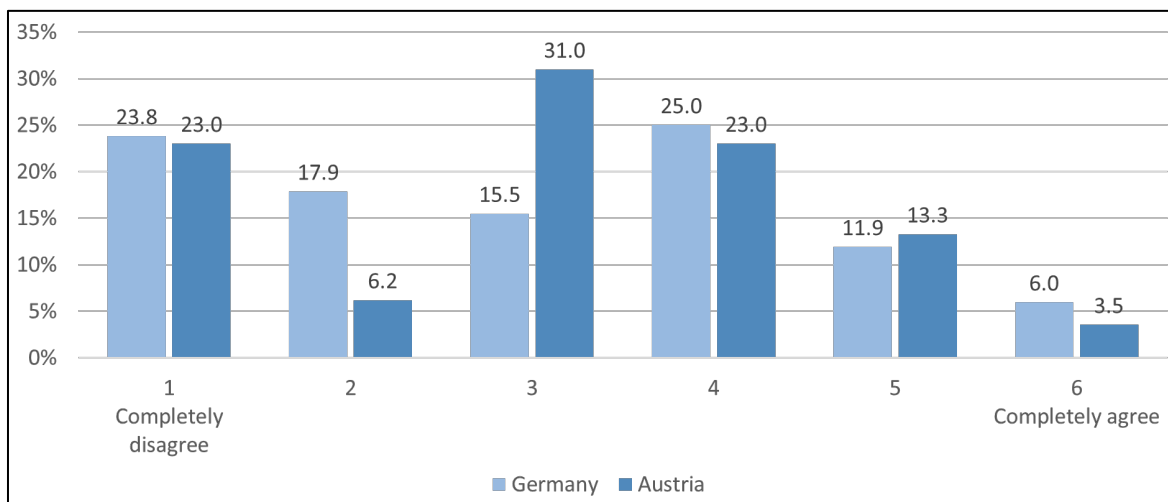


Figure 2b. Level of agreement (1- Disagree; 6 -Agree completely) on whether companies should use the rainbow as a symbol in their communication.

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, p. 563f). 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. 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.

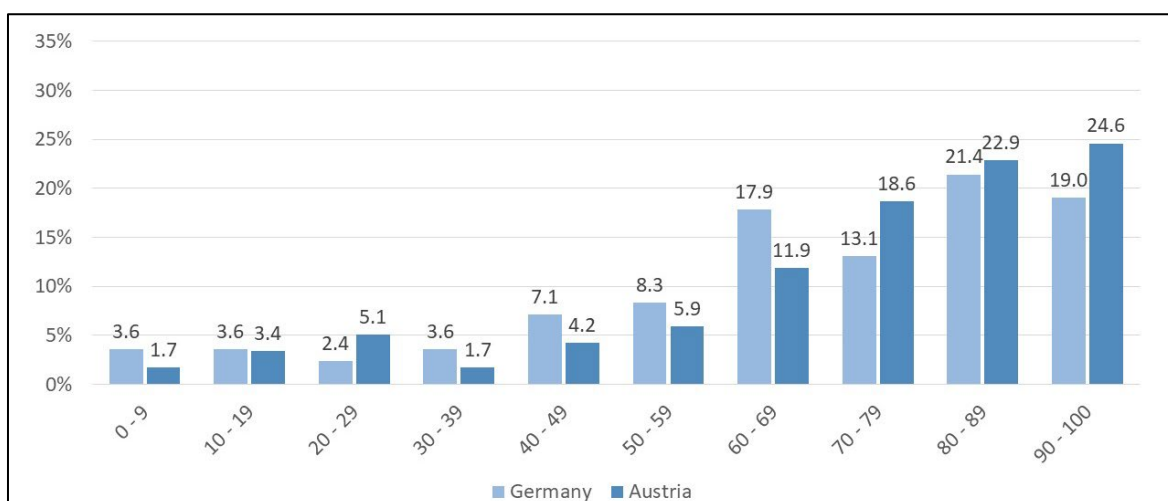


Figure 3. Respondents' suspected proportion of companies (in %) using the rainbow without real conviction ("I suspect that ___ % of companies using the rainbow as a symbol are using it without real conviction").

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, p. 867). 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 significant throughout, as indicated by p-values lower than .05.

	<i>Germany</i>		<i>Austria</i>		
<i>Statements/Items asked for</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>ANOVA</i>
“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)	Gender: F(1, 187) = 5.504, p = .02 Country: 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)	Gender: F(1, 87) = 11.75, p < .001 Country: 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)	Gender: F(1, 82) = 8.802, p = .003 Country: 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 specific 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 ($\text{cor} = -.177$, $p = .015$). For the acceptance of purpose marketing ($\text{cor} = -.117$, $p = .109$) and for the suspicion of rainbow washing ($\text{cor} = -.0099$, $p = .8941$), 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 ($\text{cor} = -.208$; $\text{sig.} = .033$) and the usage of rainbow symbols ($\text{cor} = -.274$; $\text{sig.} = .004$). 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 *field 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 in this

case 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 it is also the case elsewhere with the partial data sets of the present analyses (Mücksch et al., 2025; Siems, Gölzner, et al., 2025).

<i>Statements/Items asked for</i>	<i>Germany</i>		<i>Austria</i>		
	<i>B&E</i>	<i>No B&E</i>	<i>B&E</i>	<i>No B&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)	Studies: $F(1, 190) = .777$, $p = .379$
“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)	Studies: $F(1, 190) = 1.323$, $p = .252$
“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)	Studies: $F(1, 183) = 1.463$, $p = .228$

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

4 Summary and first implications

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. Against the background that socio-cultural differences are actually becoming increasingly relevant in corporate communication (Zhou & Kwon, 2020, p. 5f) and gender differences increasingly irrelevant (Kraft & Weber, 2012, p. 247ff.), it is interesting that 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, p. 11). This is similar to Green Hushing, which encompasses companies' and organisations' deliberate refraining from reporting on environmental and climate activities (Gatti, 2024, p. 105). This is done not because there is nothing (positive, image-enhancing) to report, but to avoid being accused of greenwashing (Font et al., 2017, p. 1012). Similarly, a possible phenomenon could be ‘rainbow hushing’ – not communicating LGBT+ content in order to avoid accusations of rainbow washing (Ginder & Johnson, 2026).

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, p. 384). 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. For this challenge, we will present an idea for communication strategies based on the Bass Model, which was established in another context.

5 Extended Implications for a differentiated Communication Strategy based on the Bass Model

The Bass model (Bass, 1969) was developed in the field of innovation management. It is one of the diffusion models and has proved its worth internationally in explaining the spread of new (long-lived) products (where first purchases are particularly important) in markets (see e.g. Hruschka, 1996, p. 111; Schmalen, 1989, p. 211ff).

The basic principle of the model is to distinguish between an innovation effect and an imitation effect. Even if there is the view that all (potential) customers are influenced by both effects (Hruschka, 1996, p. 112; Schmalen, 1979, p. 43; Schmalen et al., 1993, p. 518f), it is assumed here that for each person one of the effects is dominant (Schmalen, 1992, p. 101). Therefore, it can be concluded that there are two heterogeneous groups of people who can be described as innovators and imitators (Schmalen, 1992, p. 35; Schmalen et al., 1993, p. 514).

For a product to spread in the market, it first needs innovators. Bass understands this to mean people who “decide to adopt an innovation independently of the decision of other individuals in a social system” (Bass, 1969, p. 216).

In addition, there are imitators: Those are the people who “are influenced in the timing of adoption by the decisions of other members of the social systems” (Bass, 1969, p. 216; Schmalen, 1979, p. 43). Reasons for the imitations can be peer pressure, but also an assumed high usefulness due to the purchases of others (Hruschka, 1996, p. 109; Schmalen, 1979, p. 43, 1992, p. 35).

With regard to corporate communication and specifically advertising, the model assumes that innovators are influenced by advertising, among other things; in contrast, the imitators are only very slightly influenced by advertising, but very strongly by other imitators and the innovators (see e.g. Hruschka, 1996, p. 109; Schmalen, 1992, p. 35). The central implication is astounding and partly contradictory to other approaches in corporate communication: mass communication often remains ineffective. In order to make an innovation successful, a small number of deliberately selected target groups (‘innovators’) should be addressed instead, as for the masses (‘imitators’) only the communication between customers is decisive. The corporate communication of the company remains for imitators ineffective.

This old idea is likely to be highly relevant today: Over the past 20 years, word-of-mouth and C2C communication have proven to be highly relevant for customer perceptions and the resulting purchase decisions (e.g. Kirchler, 1993, p. 406). This type of communication is particularly relevant for customer perceptions, especially in times of consumer mistrust of corporate communication: word-of-mouth is regarded as more credible than corporate communication (Bruhn, 2022, p. 108; Silverman, 2005, p. 196). In this context, reference can also be made to the Two Step Flow Model of Communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955): The model describes the phenomenon (just like the Bass model) that communication is most effective when the issuer addresses opinion leaders, who then pass on the communication to those who trust them and listen (Katz, 1957, p. 71).

For these reasons, the Bass model thus provides an explanation for the high relevance of influencer marketing. And it also allows an implication for a possible communication strategy for the phenomenon of very heterogeneous perceptions in the acceptance of certain content among target groups shown in this paper: If, as shown, very specific target groups - in this case young women -

see LGBT+ communication much more positively than other target groups, companies could try to focus specifically and explicitly on this target group as ‘innovators’ in order to achieve an ‘imitation effect’ among the other target groups as well. Figure 4 illustrates this approach.

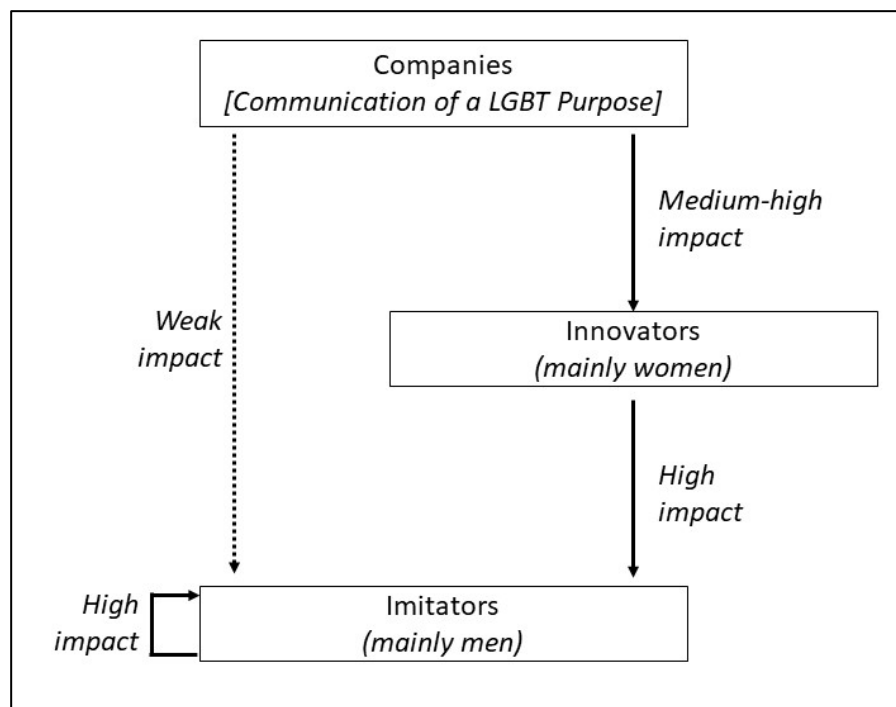


Figure 4. Application of the Bass model on the perception of LGBT+ symbols among men and women. (Source: Adaption from Bass (1969, p. 216) and Schmalen (1979, p. 44))

6 Conclusion, Limitations and Outlook

Rainbow communication is an important topic in science and practice, but as our studies confirm, it is only appreciated by some of the target groups and is often perceived as rainbow washing. In concrete terms, this shows that there are major differences between different market segments.

In addition to the fundamental realization that it is highly relevant to conduct rainbow communication honestly if at all possible in order to avoid negative perceptions, specific approaches to target group communication are of particular importance. In this paper, an adaptation of the Bass model was proposed for such issues.

Beyond its contribution to LGBT+ communication research (Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Ciszek & Pounders, 2020; Eisend & Hermann, 2019), this study can be situated more broadly within the literature on DEI communication (Agostini et al., 2025; Arsel et al., 2022; Baker et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2026). Prior research highlights that DEI-related messaging is evaluated not only on its content but also on perceived authenticity, consistency, and organizational commitment, with misalignment often resulting in accusations of diversity washing or symbolic compliance rather than substantive action (Baker et al., 2024). The present findings reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that rainbow communication is highly contingent on audience characteristics and is particularly vulnerable to skepticism when perceived as opportunistic. By adapting the Bass diffusion model to DEI and LGBT+-related communication, this paper extends existing DEI theory by conceptualizing acceptance and rejection of inclusive messaging as a dynamic social diffusion process shaped by both innovation and imitation effects. While the Bass model originates in product and technology adoption research (Bass, 1969; Schmalen, 1979), its application here illustrates its heuristic value for understanding how legitimacy perceptions surrounding DEI communication may spread across social

groups (in our case: women and men). At the same time, the results underscore the limits of such a transfer: unlike neutral innovations, DEI communication is normatively charged.

Various questions remain unanswered and limitations must also be considered:

- Specifically, the approach of adapting the Bass model was discussed by experts at the aforementioned conference and met with great approval. However, empirical testing of whether this adaptation is actually possible is still lacking, although it would be of particular interest. More precisely, the hypothesis of whether imitation effects of the acceptance of content in general and specifically LGBT+-related content in particular are actually possible should be tested.
- The other limitations also show potential for future work: 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. For instance, from existing literature, it is known that individuals experiencing higher education tend to have more liberal attitudes concerning LGBT+ equality (la Roi & Mandemakers, 2018, p. 117ff; van den Akker et al., 2013, p. 77f).
- 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 could be lower in Eastern Europe (Silvestre Cabrera et al., 2024, p. 155f). In general, it is possible that the negative attitude towards LGBT+ communication is not only caused by suspicions of rainbow washing, but also by a fundamentally negative attitude towards LGBT+ issues. Recent years have witnessed heightened societal and political debates surrounding DEI, particularly in response to significant policy shifts opposing LGBT+ equality (Ng et al., 2025). Therefore, in follow-up studies, the political attitudes of the test subjects should be taken into account and correlated with statements on rainbow communication. Furthermore, subsequent studies could examine the extent to which the current trend of “rainbow hushing”, i.e. a retreat from LGBT+ communication (Ginder & Johnson, 2026), increases the perception of rainbow washing.
- 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 of particular interest 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, brand activism and LGBT+-sensitive communication. And possibly, as Porter and Kramer (2019, p. 346) called for, this helps companies to make an even greater contribution to solving the world's social problems.

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