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THE POWER OF CONTROVERSY
– THE ROLE OF COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly relevant for companies to take a stand on socio-political issues, because more and more consumers are basing their purchasing behavior on the principles of brands. The aim of this study is to determine what role personality-based competitiveness plays in the perception and purchase intention of controversial brands. To answer this question, two quantitative studies have been administered through online surveys. The analysis of the quantitative study could not provide any evidence that points to this hypothesized connection. However, indications of previously unknown correlations in terms of gender were discovered, which could be interesting for future research.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Controversial Brands, Individual Competitiveness, Conflict Comfortability, Purchase Intention

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Group Introduction

A brand can be defined as “a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity, and to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organization” (Sammut-Bonnici 2015). Hence, branding is primarily devoted to telling the public within which prospective customers exist that a particular service or product exists and is ready to satisfy their specific needs. The year 2020 and its twists and turns have prompted people to rethink how they think about business practices. Such critical questions like; Can companies combine profit with social impact? Are worth asking. Businesses are facing a cultural shift (Parida, Sjödin, and Reim 2019) with the advent of brand controversy, a trend that continues to gain momentum (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020).

The emergence of the movement, 'Black Lives Matter' in 2013 has impacted many brands around America. In 2020, following the demand and awareness of police violence stemming from the movement's central theme to end the discrimination of people of color, many brands spoke out against racism, with a practical example being Nike (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Some were acclaimed for their actions, like Ben and Jerry's, which was quick to condemn white supremacy (Ciszek and Logan 2018). Others have been criticized for their opportunistic and even hypocritical responses in plain sight (Alemany 2020). Consumers now expect brands to make social and environmental commitments (Copeland and Bhaduri 2019), including corporate and social responsibility (Jermstittiparsert and Chankoson 2019). Exactly this dynamic can be observed right now with the Russian war in Ukraine. Companies that still do business with or in Russia are publicly accused by consumers for supporting the aggressor that way (Chen 2022).

Financial factors are a vital element in the rise of brand controversy, as consumers' wallets have replaced the ballot. According to a survey on the support of BLM, 64% of Americans' say a brand's contribution to the movement weighs in on their purchasing decision

(Brownen-Trinh, and Orujov 2020). A higher percentage of millennials and Gen Z members that are willing to spend even more on sustainable products (Wang 2022) want brands to take a firm stand on critical issues. Social media and the ability to connect brands with their customers reinforce this trend. By developing their brand identities and value propositions, companies can no longer remain silent or neutral. In other words, consumers are putting more pressure on brands and demand that they drive change themselves.

Controversies equally impact the brand image. So, gaining insight into the concept of controversial brands can help channel critical factual information about different brands and how controversial they should present themselves to mitigate the risk of losing customer loyalty. Further, brand controversies affect not only the brand's image. Kapoor and Banerjee (2021) argue that controversies around a brand also impact the stakeholders in society. Hence, a critical implication of this to managers is that the nature of the controversy is irrelevant.

"Company acts that enhance social benefit beyond what is required by law" is what corporate social responsibility refers to (Kang et al. 2016). It is mainly concerned with well accepted prosocial issues, and it is linked to a variety of favorable performance outcomes, such as company reputation, product assessments, consumer trust, and long-term loyalty. Corporate social activism, often known as brand activism, is defined as a company's public display of statements and/or actions in support or opposition to one side of a contentious sociopolitical issue (Bhagwat et al. 2020). It involves greater uncertainty and risk compared to corporate social responsibility, as it is linked to controversial and divisive societal and political issues making the reaction of the stakeholders more passionate (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

Controversy in advertisement is the structure of a product or an advertisement strategy which elicits sensitive reactions from sections of people when presented (Waller 2004). Controversial brands are the brands whose brand identities or advertisement approaches elicit these feelings of sensitivity from the consumers.

Verbosity is the situation in communication where one of the parties involved become wordier than would be necessary. Arnaud, Curtis and Waguespack (2018), argue that controversial advertising may bring about popularity of the brand since it attracts great attention of the masses because of the sensitivity that controversial issues appeal to people. When emotions arise in the consumers, the divergence of perceptions improves verbosity on the platforms that these organizations are conducting their advertisement.

1 Introduction

According to a recent study, two-thirds of consumers worldwide would buy or boycott a brand based solely on its stance on a socio-political issue (Edelman 2018). Companies are more and more expected to become active outside their actual core business by taking a stand on various issues and actively advocate for a cause (Edelman 2018). In recent years, it has been observed that companies are increasingly taking a public stance on such issues (Dodd and Supa 2014). However, it is inherent that hot button issues are controversial in themselves and involve many different positions and groups with most likely very strong opinions. This could be seen, for example, in Nike's campaign with NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who had protested racial injustice in the U.S. that angered some of its consumers to the point that they burned the brand's products and shared videos of them publicly. At the same time, however, an increase in sales by 31% percent could be observed, which was mainly due to this campaign (Pengelly 2018). It seems difficult to understand or even predict the consequences of controversial marketing. Nevertheless, it is essential for companies today to enter this terrain at least to some degree, as consumers frequently urge them to do so.

Yet, research is contradictory about whether effects on brand attitude are possible at all when it comes to controversial marketing (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). If and under what circumstances, it is worthwhile for companies to take a position on controversial sociopolitical issues is not clear yet. It can be assumed that not every consumer is prepared to take a direct public stance on a controversial issue, for example by representing a controversial brand. As a result, it is becoming increasingly important for companies to be able to understand which individual characteristics at the consumer level determine consumers' perceptions and behavior with regard to controversial marketing. It would be very valuable for marketers to decide based on these identified characteristics whether and how to take a stand on a socio-political issue and when this even represents a promising marketing measure.

When strong opposing opinions meet, as is inevitably the case with controversial issues, conflict is a natural part of it. Now, when it comes to a controversial brand, it can be concluded that the way individuals perceive and deal with conflict also has an influence on how they perceive and deal with controversial brands.

The preliminary research suggests that competitiveness as a personality-based characteristic is a crucial factor to determine someone's perception of conflict in general (Houston et al. 2000). For this reason, it will be examined what influence competitiveness has on consumers' attitudes towards conflict, and whether and to what extent this also influences the perception of controversial brands.

Furthermore, to make these findings applicable to a managerial context, we investigate whether competitiveness ultimately leads to increased purchasing intention of controversial brands. In conclusion, possible practical recommendations that managers can apply in such a context are evaluated.

2 Literature Review

There are already several studies examining psychological phenomena such as competitiveness, attitudes towards conflict and how people handle them, as well as the perception of controversy in marketing itself. The following literature review of existing research in these areas is intended to clarify the interrelationships of these phenomena and to derive hypotheses based on these findings.

Dodd and Supa (2015) noted that part of the customers that contradict the position of the company are likely to be lost. This is a fairly expected outcome given the strong opinions that such topics involve. Studies by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) came to a similar conclusion, but with an additional finding regarding consumers who agreed with the company's statement. It was observed that disagreement among consumers toward the company's position leads to significant negative changes in perception, while virtually no positive effects were

apparent when agreement was present. Only in cases, where a large negative backlash occurred a small increase in brand attitude could be measured, but this was reversed when the company backed away from the position or apologized. Consequently, from a marketing perspective, it would make no sense for companies to ever put themselves in such a risky position, if there is nothing to win and a lot to lose. Nonetheless, as other studies show, consumers demand the involvement of institutions in certain cases, regardless of the thematic proximity to the issue or the level of polarization of the subject (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Cagampang et al. 2022; Edelman 2018; Villagra et al. 2021; Vredenburg et al. 2020). In addition, it was observed that brand activism, for example among individuals with liberal ideology, indeed does have a significant effect on brand attitude (Villagra et al. 2021). This is also consistent with the success of Nike's „Dream Crazy" campaign, which, with its more politically liberal message (Schmidt et al. 2019), subsequently increased sales by over 30 percent. This was despite opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement calling for a boycott of the brand on social media with various hashtags (Martinez 2018). In a study about the influences on the perceived organizational motives of Nike, individual factors could also be identified that positively or negatively influenced them. Here, too, it was observed that Democrats in the U.S. had higher levels of approval (Kim et al. 2020). Thus, it appears that individual personality-based factors on the consumer side can certainly have a positive or negative impact on perception, behavior, and follow-up Word-of-Mouth. However, individual competitiveness and the associated attitude toward conflict in general have not played a role in previous studies, despite the conflictual nature controversial brands possess.

2.2 Competitiveness and Comfortability with Conflict

Competitiveness as a psychological variable becomes relevant whenever people interact with each other, in any given context. In this modern society it can even be considered to be omnipresent, as it is becoming more relevant in many areas of life (Bönte, Lombardo, and Urbig

2016). Therefore, competitiveness can be analyzed from organizational, macro-economic, sociological and a variety of psychological viewpoints. In this case, the characteristic refers to the expression of individual personality-based competitiveness.

Following Spence and Helmreich (1978) competitiveness is defined in this work, as the comfortability or enjoyment within competitive environments and situations. Corresponding to this, an individual in whom this characteristic is only expressed to a small extent, and thus tends to avoid competitive situations, is defined as cooperative.

As described earlier, the trait is closely related to the attitude towards conflict. Additionally, there is already some evidence of competitiveness or cooperativeness being linked to a high or low comfort level with conflict in general (Houston et al. 2000). It is expected that, people who tend to seek competitive environments are more used to conflict that may arise in these situations. Someone's attitude towards conflict plays an important role in the perception of controversial brands as well because the consumer may enter a competitive environment and is therefore exposed to conflictual interactions, due to a purchase or display of a controversial brand. This underlying relationship will be tested with the following hypothesis:

H₁: Competitive consumers are more comfortable with conflict than cooperative consumers.

2.3 Conflict and the Perception of Controversial Brands

The evolutionary need to be part of a group, the sense of belonging, is a fundamental concept that is deeply rooted in human nature. Since our early ancestors, it has affected people all over the world and across all cultures equally, as being inside or outside a group can be a matter of life or death. The consequences of this primal need have far-reaching effects on thinking and behavior, especially in the public sphere. As a rule, conformity is generally safer than confrontation (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

Controversial issues often generate strong and firm opinions. Talking about controversial topics can strain personal relationships and lead to conflict (Leary, Knight, and Johnson 1987). Engaging in a discussion about, for example, abortion, immigration policy, or social justice always involves the risk that the discussion escalates. For some people, this thought feels extremely discomforting, as they are afraid of being socially excluded from the group (Leary, Knight, and Johnson 1987). As a result, more cooperative individuals try to avoid controversial issues altogether, making these individuals significantly more conflict averse (Baumeister and Tice 1990). This is expected to negatively affect their perception of controversial brands and content since it represents exactly what they intend to avoid.

On the other hand, not all individuals are reluctant to nonconformity and the possibility of conflict. A study by Bellezza, Gino and Keinan (2013) about signals of nonconformity in clothing, shows that nonconforming behaviors can “lead to positive inferences of status and competence in the eyes of others”. This means that if a costly signal is intentionally generated, this can be perceived as confident (Feltovich, Harbaugh, and To 2002; Grafen 1990; Zahavi 1975), powerful and autonomous in the perception of third parties, since the “sender risks the social costs of nonconformity without fear of losing her place in the social hierarchy” (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2013, 35). The desire to move up the social hierarchy is closely related to self-interest in power and achievement, which competitive people are significantly more likely to strive for according to research by Lu et al. (2013). In the process, they are also much more comfortable with conflict that may arise while pursuing these goals compared to their cooperative counterparts (Houston et al. 2000).

Controversial advertisements and brand perceptions always have a conflictual nature and therefore require a certain comfortability with these contents on the consumer side. Following the previous assumption in H₁, it is expected that competitiveness positively

influences an individual's attitude towards controversy. From this the following hypothesis can be derived:

H₂: Competitive consumers have a more positive perception of controversial brands than cooperative consumers.

Since a positive perception of brands in general have been associated with a higher purchase intention in several studies across different industries (Foroudi et al. 2018; Wang and Yang 2010; Xue et al. 2020), it is expected to apply to controversial brands as well.

Related to this, and consistent with the previous hypotheses, consumer perceptions of controversial products and brands can also affect purchasing behavior favorably, as several studies have reported (Davidson 2003; Singh and Chahal 2020; Summers, Belleau, and Xu 2006)

Ultimately, the findings from the previous hypotheses are only truly beneficial for managers if the purchase intention is positively influenced by the tested variables. To make these results applicable to a managerial context, it is therefore interesting to see to what extent competitiveness, and therefore possibly a more positive perception of controversy, influences purchasing intention. The hypothesis derived from this is:

H₃: Competitive consumers are more likely to buy products from controversial brands rather than cooperative consumers.

3 Methodology

A quantitative method was chosen because the causal relationships between the variables are tested. To test the stated hypotheses, a study was conducted by means of two experiments administered through online questionnaires. The first study served as a pretest, through which the analysis of the results revealed some aspects where the research design could be improved. The second study, with the very similar adapted method was conducted afterwards. The samples consisted of 214 participants in the first study, and 100 in the second.

3.1 Experiments

In both experiments controversy was the controlled variable. This was accomplished by exposing participants to either the controversial material or the non-controversial according to the definition of controversy stated above. The participants were assigned automatically and randomized to one of the two scenarios by the survey tool Qualtrics, which was used to collect the data. In this way, both scenarios were presented almost the same number of times.

For the purpose of excluding pre-existing opinions on real brands and a possibly accompanying distorted perception of the presented material, a fictitious brand was introduced. Therefore, two different advertisements of the sports apparel company ORBIT were created. One of them was controversial, the other one was not. In the controversial condition, a campaign was presented in which the company advocates for refugee rights and against racism. Thus, they publicly take a stand on a socially relevant issue, that usually generates very strong opposing opinions, which is in line with the definition of controversy. (Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Mukherjee and Althuize 2020). Apart from this, no further information on the company was provided in order to avoid any bias. In the control condition, the scenario described was intended to be very close to the other condition in terms of the described campaign, only with a low level of controversy instead. After the manipulation check in the first study was not successful, because both scenarios were perceived as very controversial, the control condition was revised, and the content of the campaign was changed slightly to ensure a successful manipulation in the second study. Also, to capture the purchase intention correctly a few additional questions were added as the first study was not able to achieve this.

4 Study 1

In the following, the structure and procedure of the first study will be described. The design of this study also serves as a basis for the second study, which will be described in more detail in chapter 5.1.

4.1 Procedure

The first part of the questionnaire was the scenario to ensure that the participant is as unbiased as possible. Specifically, participants in the controversial scenario condition read the following:

Imagine the following fictional scenario:

The well-known international sportswear company ORBIT has launched an advertising campaign in March 2022 titled "Open your arms!". The commercials and posters feature popular athletes from different sports and nationalities who are signed to ORBIT. They talk about the causes and consequences of migration and call for fundamental rethinking. It is emphasized that every refugee, no matter where they are from should be welcomed with open arms. They demand people to speak up and take a stand against racism. ORBIT's mission to contribute something to solving these issues was communicated very clearly. They publicly took a stand against racism and for humanity themselves. "Open your arms!" created a huge buzz around the world, however, opinions among consumers are very divided in the debate about the topic. Some major disagreements emerged concerning the message that the company conveys, as some support it and some do not.

In contrast, participants in the non-controversial scenario condition read:

The well-known international sportswear company ORBIT has launched an advertising campaign in March 2022 titled "Open your arms!". The commercials and posters feature popular athletes from different sports and nationalities who are signed to ORBIT. They talk about the causes and consequences of migration and call for fundamental rethinking. It is emphasized that every refugee, no matter where they are from should be welcomed with open arms. They demand people to speak up and take a stand against racism. ORBIT's mission to contribute something to solving these issues was communicated very clearly. They publicly took a stand against racism and for humanity themselves. "Open your arms!" created a huge buzz around the world. The overall public opinion on ORBIT's campaign was quite unified as most people agreed with the campaign.

Since there was no preliminary work with this new fictional scenario to establish its validity a manipulation check with four questions was included, e.g. *"The message of the advertising campaign can cause disputes between individuals."* With 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; full scales in appendix). Thereby it was ensured, that the controversial scenario was indeed perceived as such, and relevant rival interpretations were ruled out effectively (Fiedler, McCaughey, and Prager 2021).

Hereafter, through one open question on Orbit as well as a subset of the Multi-Factor Brand Bravery Scale (see Appendix 1), the overall brand perception as well as specific aspects on cause, activism, brand identification and word-of-mouth of the scenario could be captured (Jain et al. 2021).

Then the conflict comfortability was measured with a ten-item scale containing question on conflict approach (e.g.: *“I like to work through conflict.”* With 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) and questions on conflict avoidance (e.g.: *“I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with others”* With 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Because controversial marketing can touch on many different causes and areas of life, the focus in this case is on personal attitudes to conflict in general. The “Attitude Toward Conflict Scale” is an appropriate measure for this as it “evaluates [the] personal conception of conflict rather than relational problems between parties or their conflict strategy preferences” (Bresnahan et al. 2009).

The competitiveness versus cooperativeness item block consisted of four questions like *“I like situations in which I compete with others.”* (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This variable was measured as the last thematic relevant part of the survey in order not to prime participants through the competitive items before exposing them to the scenarios and measuring the conflict comfortability. Since this paper's definition of competitiveness is based on Bönte et al. (2016) as well as the relevant meta-studies (Houston et al. 2002; Newby and Klein 2014; Smither and Houston 1992), the items of these publications also prove useful here intending to assess the competitiveness level of the participants. This results in the following items: *“I enjoy competing against others.”* from Newby and Klein's (2014) ‘general competitiveness’ subscale, the reversed adaption of this item from Smither and Houston's (1992) subscale *“I find competitive situations unpleasant.”*, Bönte and Piegeler's (2013) adaptation of Helmreich and Spence's (1978) WOFO competitiveness subscale *“I like situations in which I compete with*

others.”, as well as one item including goal orientation from Bönke et al. (2016) “*I prefer competing with others when pursuing a goal over pursuing the goal alone.*”

To make possibly relevant correlations between the main variables of this study and certain customer characteristics visible in an explorative way, a psychographic profile was created in addition to demographic data such as age, gender, nationality, and education level, income. With the help of the List of Values Scale, consumer behavior can be predicted in the same way as with comparable longer questionnaires (Kahle, Beatty, and Homer 1986).

4.2 Results

Out of 380 participants in total, 215 completed the questionnaire and one person did not give consent to the processing of the data, eliminating 166 data sets. Thus, the sample amounts to 214. Of the final sample of 214, 107 (50.2%) were male, 101 (47.4%) were female, one (.5%) was non-binary, and 4 (1.9%) did not want to specify their gender. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 66 years ($M = 34.5$; $SD = 13.8$). Most participants were of German nationality (72.5%) and the most common educational levels were bachelor's (36.3%) and master's degrees (37.7%). While the most common annual income was up to €10,000, the other options were distributed evenly. More details on these demographics can be found in Appendix 2.

4.2.1 Reliability Check

Analysis revealed the items used to measure competitiveness and brand perceptions were highly correlated with each other and offered consistent measurement of the two constructs based on the Cronbach's alpha of .89 for the Individual Competitiveness Scale and .93 for the Brand Bravery Scale. For the Manipulation Check ($\alpha = .65$) as well as for the Attitude Towards Conflict subscale ($\alpha = .65$) relatively low alpha values were measured, indicating a low, but not necessarily insufficient inter-item reliability (Nunnally 1967). Still, this should be considered given the recommended minimum value of .7 (Lance, Butts, and Michels 2006).

4.2.2 Manipulation Check

To check whether the manipulation of the scenarios was successful, an average score of the four questions was calculated and tested by means of a t-test for independent samples. This showed that the average perception of controversy did not differ significantly between the controversial scenario ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.01$) and the non-controversial scenario ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.06$). The manipulation check was therefore unsuccessful because both scenarios were perceived as controversial to the same extent on average ($t(210) = -.36$, $p = .36$). Due to the failed manipulation, the two conditions could not be used to analyze the results of the survey. Based on the results of study 1, the questionnaire was improved in order to obtain usable data for study 2.

5 Study 2

The questionnaire in Study 2 was composed mainly of the same items used in the previous study, with some adaptations that will be discussed in the following.

5.1 Procedure

In the second study, some adaptations were made to improve the research design. Thus, three adapted items to measure the participants' purchase intention from Becker-Olsen et al. (2011) were included: "*I would buy a product from Orbit.*", "*I would recommend a product from Orbit.*" and "*I would use a product from Orbit.*" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Additionally, the non-controversial scenario was adapted after the manipulation check in the first study was unsuccessful. For this purpose, the level of controversy was decreased a lot, so the control condition would be perceived significantly different from the controversial condition. While the controversial scenario remained the same as in study 1, the adapted control condition was the following:

The well-known international sportswear company ORBIT has launched an advertising campaign in March 2022 titled "Open your arms!". The commercials and posters feature popular athletes from different sports and nationalities who are signed to ORBIT.

They emphasize the importance of diversity, including in sports, and that gender, ethnicity or religion must not be a cause for discrimination. ORBIT's mission to celebrate diversity was communicated very clearly. "Open your arms!" created a huge buzz around the world. Pretty much all consumers received the message positively and it brought together a large majority of people. The overall public opinion on ORBIT's campaign was very unified.

5.2 Results

Out of 100 participants in total, 20% were male, 78% were female, and two identified as non-binary. The age of study 2 participants ranged from 18 to 70 years ($M = 38.14$; $SD = 11.9$). with 96% most participants were from the United Kingdom. 46% stated the bachelor's degree as their highest level of education, 12% finished high school, and 6% hold a professional degree. The most common income levels were up to 25.000€ (34%) and up to 50.000€ (35%). A more detailed overview of these demographics can be found in Appendix 2.

5.2.1 Reliability Check

As expected after the reliability check of study 1, all alpha values were sufficient in study 2 as well since the scales themselves were not changed. The new purchase intention scale yielded a very high inter-item reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .969$.

5.2.2 Manipulation Check

After the aforementioned changes that were made, the manipulation between the controversial condition ($M = 5.83$, $SD = .61$) and the non-controversial scenario ($M = 4.75$, $SD = .9$) was successful in the second study ($t(98) = 6.98$, $p < .001$). This proves that the research design was successfully modified, and two conditions are provided in Study 2 for further analysis to investigate controversy.

5.2.3 Hypotheses Testing

The formulated hypotheses are analyzed in the following with the corresponding statistical tests, as far as the previous checks allow. For these statistical tests, an alpha level of .05 was used as the significance level. Also, reverse formulated questions have been inversely

recoded accordingly. The scales to measure the different constructs were then calculated through the average of the respective questions. SPSS Process Syntax by Hayes (2012) was applied for the mediation and moderator analysis.

5.2.3.1 Competitiveness and Comfortability with Conflict

H₁: Competitive consumers are more comfortable with conflict than cooperative consumers.

Based on Spearman's rank correlation, comparing the individual competitiveness and the attitude towards conflict there is a moderate, but highly significant relationship between competitiveness and a more positive attitudes toward conflict ($r = .35, p < .001$). However, the linear regression analysis shows that the competitiveness trait is a predictor of comfortability with conflict ($b = .35, t(95) = 3.68, p < .001$). Thus competitiveness explains around 12,4% of the variance in comfortability with conflict ($R^2 = .124, F(1, 95) = 13.51, p < .001$). Even though the direction of the effect determined by the regression analysis, is relatively small, it can be assumed on the basis of both analyses that competitive consumers are indeed more comfortable with conflict than cooperative consumers. H_0 can therefore be rejected and H_1 is accepted.

5.2.3.2 Perception of Controversial Brands

H₂: Competitive consumers have a more positive perception of controversial brands than cooperative consumers.

To examine this, it is tested whether competitiveness and conflict comfortability interact with controversy to predict brand perception. The reasoning behind this is that higher competitiveness is expected to lead to higher comfortability with conflict, and therefore results in a more positive perception of controversy. Hayes Process Model 15 was used to statistically test this relationship. As the previous findings suggest, the effect of competitiveness on conflict comfortability was positive ($R^2 = .144, F(1, 91) = 15.32, p = .0002$) and significant ($b = .048,$

$t(91) = 3.91, p = .0002$). However, there was no significant interaction of controversy as the moderator with competitiveness ($b = .144, t(87) = 0.57, p = .57$) nor conflict comfortability ($b = .294, t(87) = -0.49, p = .621$). In summary, the analysis of the data did not reveal any evidence of the presumed relationship formulated in H_2 . The H_0 can therefore not be rejected.

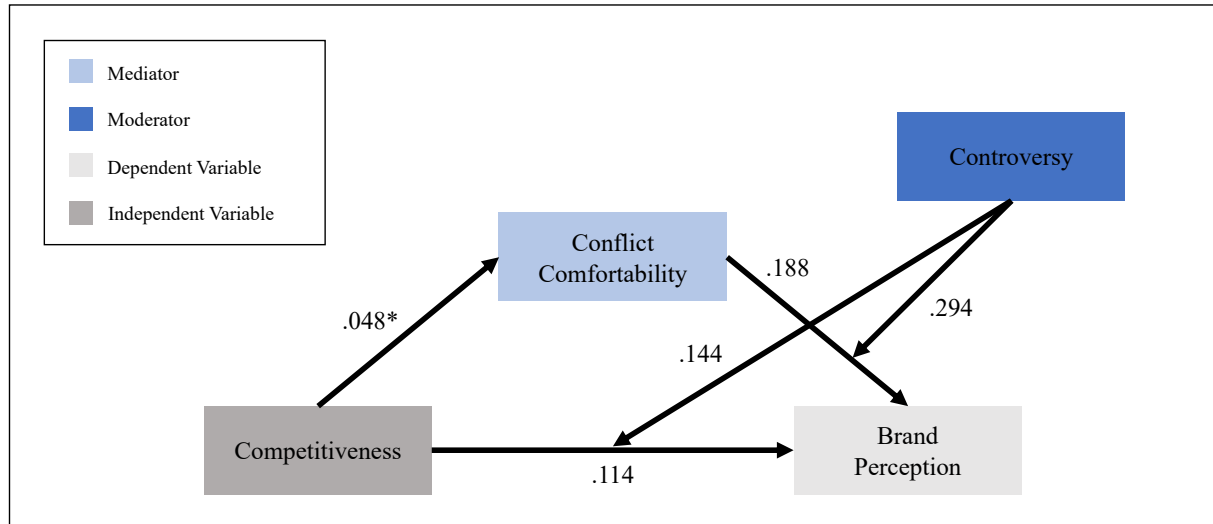


Figure 1: Visual representation of H_2 according to Hayes Process Model 15 (by author).

5.2.3.3 Purchase Intention of Controversial Brands

H_3 : *Competitive consumers are more likely to buy products from controversial brands rather than cooperative consumers.*

First, it is noted that there is no significant difference in purchase intention between the two conditions presented to the participants, as shown by a t-test for independent samples ($t(97) = -.75, p = .47$). In order to understand whether individual competitiveness and controversy interact according to the stated hypothesis, “Hayes Process Model 1” was applied. According to the model, there is no significant moderating effect of competitiveness on the relationship of controversy and purchase intention ($R^2 = .006, F(3, 95) = 0.18, p = .91$). Consequently, there is no sufficient basis to reject H_0 .

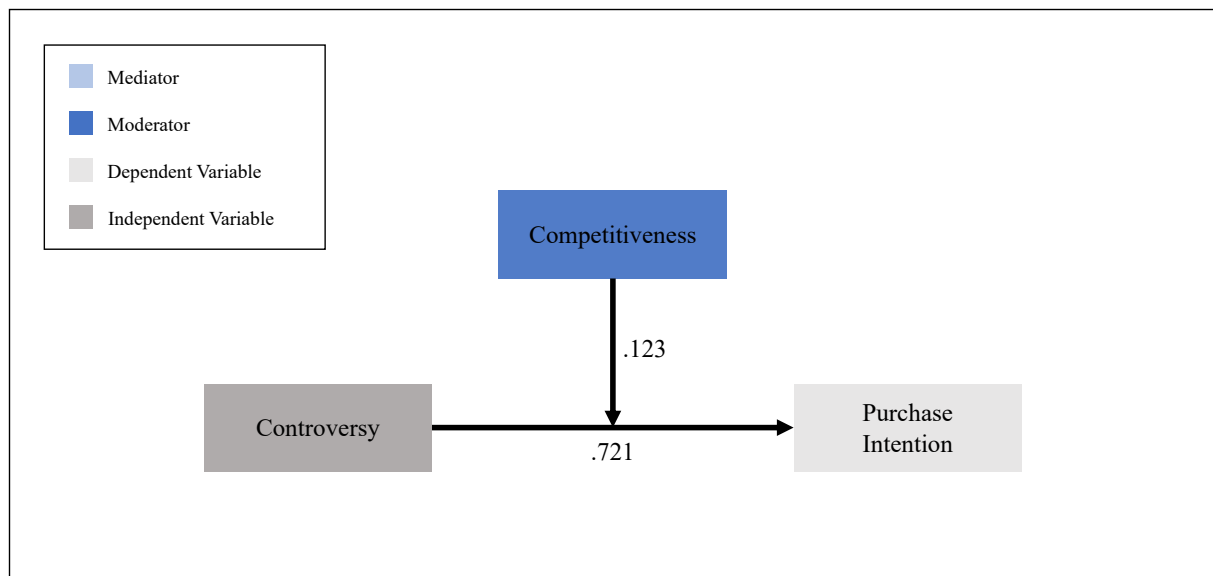


Figure 2: Visual representation of H_3 according to Hayes Process Model 1 (by author).

Now, to test the complete model linking the previous hypotheses together, Process Model 8 was used to include a possible moderated mediation that includes the brand perception. As expected brand perception had a significant impact ($b = .079$, $t(91) = 13.06$, $p < .0001$) on participants purchase intention ($R^2 = .656$, $F(4, 90) = 42.94$, $p < .0001$). Tough, analysis showed that there was no evidence of moderated mediation (95%, $CI[-.201, .354]$), which means that brand perception has no mediating effect, and controversy as a moderator does not influence the direct interactions to purchase intention ($b = .105$, $t(90) = .14$, $p = .887$) nor brand perception ($b = .14$, $t(91) = .31$, $p = .755$).

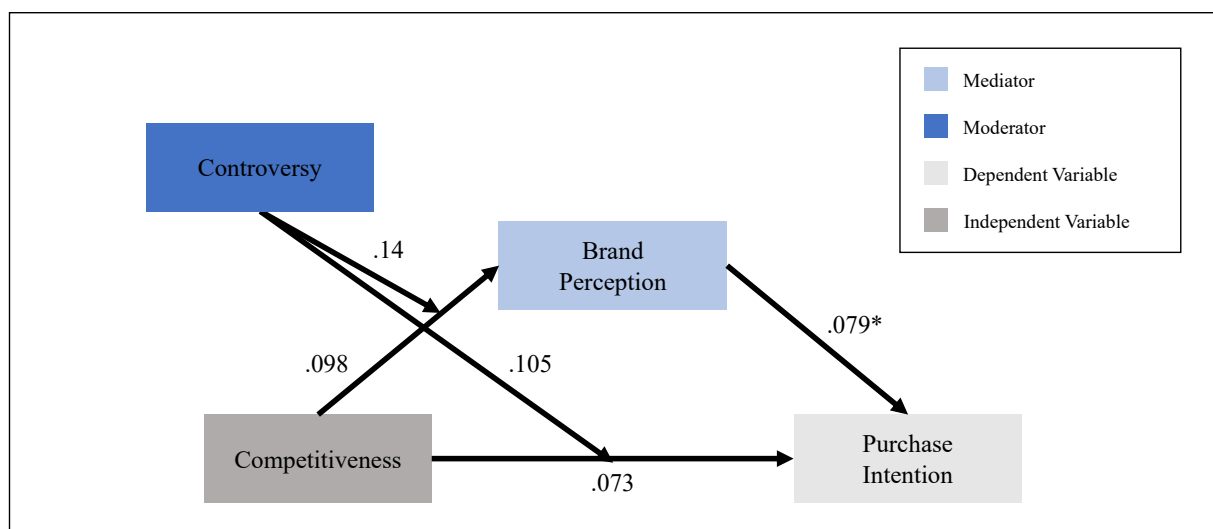


Figure 3: Visual representation of H_3 according to Hayes Process Model 8 (by author).

6 Exploratory Research

Particularly because the field of research is still relatively untapped, this study and the data collected through the two surveys are intended to reveal previously unknown linkages or indications for possible follow-up research. All relevant results are presented below.

Segmentation Variables.

Furthermore, segmentation variables were explored that might affect the weight, people assign to the positive and negative sides of controversy, e.g., by focusing on the positive and discounting the negative when exposed to controversial marketing. When comparing the mean values of the different demographics with the computed indexes, some strong differences become apparent among Study 1 participants. According to the t-test for independent samples, male participants had a significantly worse perception of controversy compared to their female counter parts ($t(200) = -2.82, p = .015$). This is an interesting outcome, especially when looking at the gender differences in conflict and competitiveness. The men's mean value was significantly higher compared to women for both variables, competitiveness ($t(203) = 4.13, p < .001$) as well as comfortability with conflict ($t(196) = 1.74, p = .042$). Although these results do not indicate how the different variables affect each other, they do suggest gender differences that are to be investigated in detail in another study.

Attribution question.

Answers to the open-ended attribution question were evaluated qualitatively and were in line with the perception they had of the controversial brand. The most mentioned characteristics were bold, open minded, caring, courageous and strong on the positive side but also opportunistic, manipulative, and capitalistic on the contrary.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Competitiveness could not be identified as a factor influencing consumer perception or purchase behavior in the context of controversial brands. Nevertheless, especially the

exploratory research contributes to the current state of research and reveals possible interesting starting points for future studies.

Two basic correlations on which the hypotheses were based could be observed as expected. First, the relationship between competitiveness and conflict comfortability was statistically significant, as the literature had already implied (Houston et al. 2000). On the other hand, the association between brand perception and purchase intention was also found to be significant. This result is in line with the expectations and the research (Foroudi et al. 2018; Wang and Yang 2010; Xue et al. 2020). Despite these underlying assumptions, there are no significant correlations between these two main constructs, i.e., the individual characteristics tested for and consumer behavior and perceptions of controversial brands. While this suggests that competitiveness is not a trait that should be used to target the audience of such a campaign, conversely, it can be concluded that cooperative consumers do not perceive the same impressions more negatively and do not have lower purchase intentions. In this context, therefore, the conflictual nature of the campaign itself would be irrelevant. However, this study is also the first to test this relationship. It is possible that a different research design may nevertheless reveal evidence of a link between competitiveness and controversial brands.

As the results of the second study show, the perception that consumers have of a brand is in contrast relevant for the purchase intention. Even in the case of a fictitious company like Orbit, where no attitude or opinion existed in advance, it was decided on the basis of few information whether the brand would be perceived positively or negatively. Translated into the real world, where significantly more impressions and information shape the relationship with a brand, this result emphasizes how essential brand development is. Following DeNisi and Murphy (2017), people find it considerably easier to recall information from an entity that is consistent with their sympathy for it. This means that positive information is more likely to be retrieved from liked companies and negative information from disliked ones. Interestingly,

especially for controversial brands, if negative impressions are recalled, they are discounted as less severe and attributed to external influences if there is sympathy towards the target, as a meta-study showed (Sutton et al. 2013). This bias is thus a form of the halo effect (Ohlwein and Bruno 2021).

The consumers' opinion on the issue Orbit supports in the scenario did not have a significant influence on the perception or purchase intention, even though it was not captured separately. Despite most participants agreed with the company's basic position on refugees, this opinion was not associated with a (higher) purchase intention as it was described in previous papers (Edelman 2018; Pendergast, Ho, and Phau 2002). Nevertheless, it is still undeniably relevant, consumers agree with a company's message on an important issue, but it appears not to lead to increased purchase intention. If this result is viewed in the context of the current literature, it corresponds to the outcome of some of the mentioned studies (Cagampan et al. 2022, Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), where there was also no positive effect of agreement with the message on their decision of buying from the brand.

The exploratively discovered gender differences go in the same direction. Even with significantly higher competitiveness and conflict comfortability, men had worse brand perceptions than women. It is true that differences between genders have already been discovered in the past with regard to the expression of certain individual personality-based characteristics (Strube 1981). However, the lower brand attitude towards controversial brands, despite significantly higher values for the measured variables, massively contradicts the expectations. Although no direct explanation for these results exists, one possible reason could be the way in which these variables were measured. After all, the items used, were asking participants to rate their own behavior and character. It is possible that men simply rate themselves as more competitive overall, or that women rate themselves as less so.

7.1 Managerial Implications

It should be noted that providing managers with a blueprint for their next controversial marketing campaign is not really viable, especially since the expected effect has not been observed. Given the complexity and the fact that it is not yet clear when controversial marketing is successful, there is no reliable predictor for these measures. However, as with traditional marketing, it is crucial for marketers to understand their consumers in terms of their needs, behavior, and characteristics. For this, it is essential to constantly monitor these factors and, if necessary, adjust the strategy.

For the realization it is certainly useful to learn from the best practice examples like Nike, who have set a new industry benchmark through emotional and skillful storytelling. They have managed to communicate their message authentically, which is probably also because Nike brand has a social relevance that is necessary to achieve results with attitude. Especially in terms of controversial marketing, marketers need to understand that it tends to contribute to medium- to long-term brand building. Immediately after the release of the "Dream Crazy" commercial the stock price of Nike dropped by over 3% (Thomas 2018) but turned out to be the most effective ad campaign of the year in the weeks that followed (Effie 2020).

8 Limitations and Further Research

The unsuccessful manipulation of the scenario was a limiting factor in the first study but may be insightful for future research. The refugee issue from the scenario may already be seen as extremely polarizing regardless of the controversial or non-controversial public opinion described in the scenarios. This could pose a fundamental challenge to research designs on this topic, as all controversial issues face this potential risk. The fact that a majority of participants was from European countries may have added to the controversial perception of the non-controversial scenario since refugee policy has been one of the most prevalent and controversial topics for the last years.

A further limiting factor of the scenario is the fictionality of the company and the limitation to the sportswear industry. In subsequent research, it would make sense to also test examples from other industries and with real world brands. Some participants stated they could not assign attributes because they did not know enough about the company. In a real-life example, the perception of the values associated with the company could influence the perceived authenticity of the campaign.

The List of Values Scale (Kahle, Beatty, and Homer 1986) did not prove to be adequate for examining personality-based characteristics in this context. Testing other measuring constructs to uncover possible connections is certainly useful, given the state of research, which offers little evidence. Examining individual personality-based variables that may influence the perception of controversial marketing in this way continues to be an important component for researchers and marketers. Thus, overall, this work made a small contribution to better understanding consumers and their behavior in relation to controversial brands. In addition, competitiveness should not yet be written off as a possible influence. Depending on the interpretation and measurement method of the construct, it could lead to different results. A possible alternative would be not to understand cooperative individuals as less competitive, but to conceptualize cooperativeness as a construct in its own right, as described in a paper by Lu et al. (2013). Possibly this approach offers new and more promising ways to analyze the relationship.

Given the findings on the influence of the level of agreement with the company, it is interesting for future research to explore how consumers react when a brand with which they have a stable favorable relationship takes a position on a socio-political issue that is contrary to their own. Exploring the limits of how far this pre-existing trust extends until this relationship is overloaded would be helpful for companies to calculate the risk of losses of existing customers.

Ultimately, controversial marketing is always about assessing the risk and minimizing it as far as possible in terms of the anticipated success. As already explained in the beginning, it is in the nature of controversial issues that strong opposing opinions meet. This is precisely where the potential and the power of controversial marketing lie, which makes it so alluring for companies and which will become even more important as research and practical experience progress.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Survey Questions and Study 2 Adaptations

Construct	Scale	Source	Items
Manipulation Check	–	Fiedler, McCaughey, and Prager 2021	1 This advertising campaign is important for society. 2 Viewers will have strong opinions on the subject of the campaign. 3 The message of the advertising campaign can cause disputes between individuals. 4 Orbit took a risk with this campaign.
Brand Perception	– Multi-Factor Brand Bravery Scale	Jain et al. 2021	5 If Orbit were a person, which attributes would you assign to it? (open) 6 The brand believes in the greater good. 7 The brand goes above and beyond its own interest to benefit others. 8 This brand is willing to reinvent itself for a cause. 9 The brand is socially responsible and uses sustainable business practices. 10 The brand is innovative and defies the industry norms. 11 The brand is unique and stands out of the crowd. 12 The brand has a path distinct from its competitors. 13 The brand stands up to its competitors. 14 I recommend to other people to support this brand. 15 I talk directly to other people about my experience with this brand. 16 This brand represents who I am. 17 This brand helps me express my identity. 18 I feel personally connected to this brand.
Conflict Comfortability	Attitude Toward Conflict Scale	Bresnahan et al. 2009	19 Conflict is positive because it gets problems out into the open where they can be dealt with. 20 I believe conflict is healthy because it forces people to face their problems. 21 I am always firm in pursuing my side of the issue. 22 I like to work through conflict. 23 I like when other people challenge my opinions. 24 I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with others. 25 I wait to see if a dispute will resolve itself before taking action. 26 I think of conflict as something ugly. 27 I hate arguments. 28 I avoid conflict if at all possible.
Competitiveness	Individual Competitiveness Scale	Bönte, Lombardo, and Urbig 2016	29 I enjoy competing against others. 30 I find competitive situations unpleasant. 31 I like situations in which I compete with others. 32 I prefer competing with others when pursuing a goal over pursuing the goal alone.
Demographics and Segmentation Variables	List of Values Scale	Kahle, Beatty, and Homer 1986	33 The following is a list of things that some people look for or want out of life. Please study the list carefully and then rate each thing on how important it is in your daily life, where 1 = not at all important, and 9 = extremely important. Sense of Belonging, Excitement, Warm Relationships with Others, Self-Fulfillment, Being Well Respected, Fun and Enjoyment of Life, Security, Self-Respect, A Sense of Accomplishment
	Demographics	–	34 What is your sex? 35 How old are you? 36 What is your nationality? 37 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received? 38 Which of these describes your personal income last year?
Study 2 Adaptions			
Purchase Intention	Purchase Intention Subscale	Becker-Olsen et al. 2011	39 I would buy a product from Orbit. 40 I would recommend a product from Orbit. 41 I would use a product from Orbit.

Appendix 2

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha for Scales

Study 1	Cronbach's Alpha
Manipulation Check	.649
Brand Bravery Scale	.933
Attitude towards Conflict Scale	.645
Individual Competitiveness Scale	.885
<i>Study 2</i>	
Manipulation Check	.629
Brand Bravery Scale	.943
Attitude Towards Conflict Scale	.769
Individual Competitiveness Scale	.931
Purchase Intention	.969

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Age

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation	Variance
Study 1	210	20	66	34,31	0,94	13,61	185,24
Study 2	100	18	70	38,14	1,19	11,94	142,53

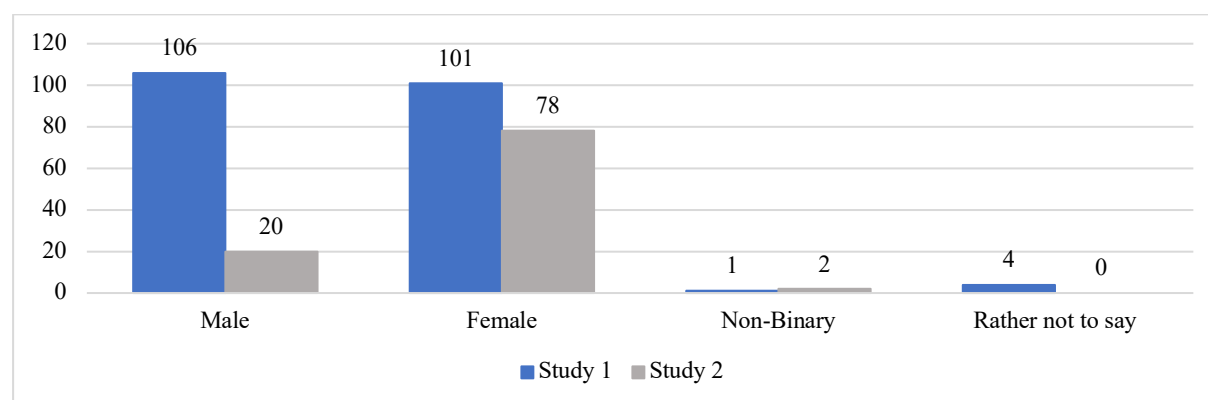


Figure 4: Distribution by Gender

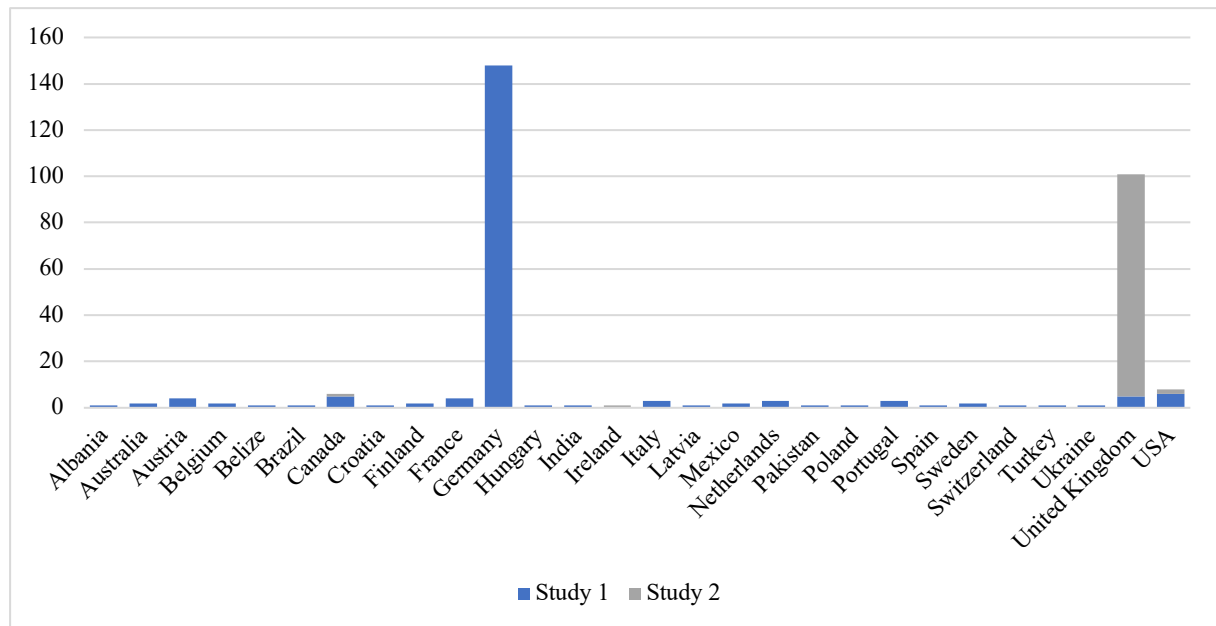


Figure 5: Distribution by Nationality

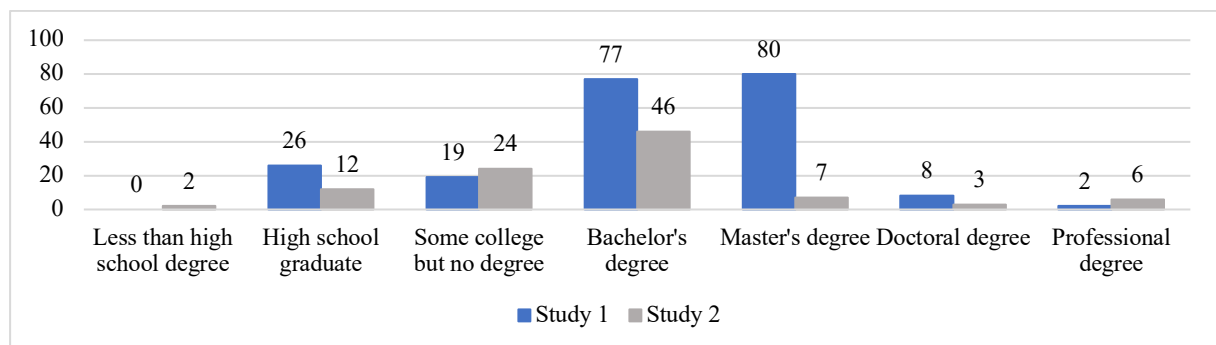


Figure 6: Distribution by Level of Education

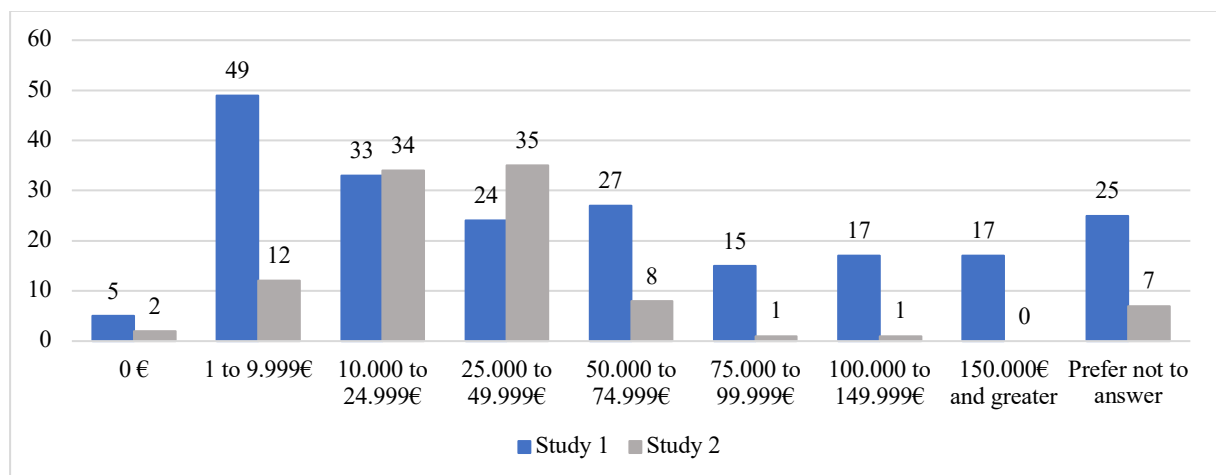


Figure 7: Distribution by Personal Income