TACKLING INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL DIVIDE -
MOVING THE MARKETING DISCIPLINE TOWARD SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Germany faces significant social sustainability challenges, including rising inequalities and social divide, threatening social cohesion and economic prosperity. While ecological sustainability has gotten widespread attention in the marketing discipline, less focus has been put on social sustainability. This paper explores how the marketing discipline can contribute to fostering social sustainability by tackling social challenges. We first identify and summarize two of Germany's major social challenges: inequalities and social divide. Leveraging the 5P model, we then propose actionable solutions, discuss real-world examples, and outline future research avenues to tackle these challenges with marketing tools, methods, and concepts. By spotlighting social challenges, this work seeks to inspire the community to consider holistic social sustainability issues in marketing research and practice.

Keywords: Social Sustainability, Inequalities, Social Divide, Marketing, 5P

1. WHY MARKETING SHOULD PAY MORE ATTENTION TO SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Germany, like many other nations, is facing increasing social challenges in recent years that threaten societal cohesion and, in turn, social and economic prosperity (McGuinn et al., 2020). Social sustainability challenges encompass a broad spectrum of issues, including rising inequalities in income and wealth, child poverty, demographic shifts, migration, and societal integration, increasing the pressures of maintaining social cohesion amid rising social division (Littig & Griessler, 2005; McGuinn et al., 2020; McKenzie, 2004). These issues have dwelled for a long time and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bobrovnikova et al., 2023). Unsurprisingly, the World Economic Forum (WEF) lists "erosion of social cohesion" in 2022 and "social divide" in 2024 amongst the top five risks for Germany in their Global Risks Reports (WEF, 2022, 2024).

While ecological sustainability, particularly the climate crisis, has rightfully dominated the sustainability discourse in the marketing literature, the equally pressing social challenges have not received the same level of attention. However, these challenges, if left unaddressed, can potentially increase the social divide and, thereby, hinder economic progress, undermining future generations' well-being (Littig & Griessler, 2005; McGuinn et al., 2020; McKenzie, 2004). Social sustainability is broadly defined as the ability of a society to consistently achieve a good standard of social well-being across various dimensions, including equality, justice, and inclusivity (Dempsey et al., 2011; Littig & Griessler, 2005; McGuinn et al., 2020; Vallance et al., 2011; Vavik & Keitsch, 2010). In other words, social sustainability is "a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition" (McKenzie, 2004, p. 12). It can also be an enabler of ecological sustainability, as social issues often exacerbate environmental and economic degradation by marginalizing vulnerable populations who are less able to contribute to and benefit from sustainable practices (Dragicevic, 2018, 2020; Giddings et al., 2002).

When researching topics related to social sustainability, marketing scholars have primarily relied on broad definitions of social sustainability (Larivière & Smit, 2022) and focused on employee retention or consumer well-being-related matters (e.g., Lee et al., 2021), transformative service (Anderson et al., 2013), or specific consumer groups such as minorities or consumers experiencing vulnerability (e.g., older adults, patients, children, people with disabilities; Henkel et al., 2022; Russell-Bennett et al., 2024). Moreover, the current discourse in the marketing discipline often neglects the perspective of younger generations and their views on future developments (Haenlein et al., 2022). While extant works provide valuable insights into important social issues, they often focus on singular symptoms of unsubstantiated social sustainability rather than addressing overarching social challenges, which, not only but also in Germany, include inequalities and rising social divide.

However, these challenges are the main lever to achieving social sustainability—similar to how systemic CO2 emissions reduction in the energy sector is crucial to achieving ecological sustainability, though often neglected in favor of much less effective measures such as individual sustainable behavior in the context of clothing or recycling (Büttgen et al., 2023; Zechiel, 2024). Hence, the marketing discipline might reflect on the focus it sets and consider its role in supporting social responsibility by addressing social challenges more holistically.

Previous research already emphasizes that the marketing discipline has great potential to enhance social sustainability (Berry et al., 2024; George et al., 2016). In this work, we aim to put a spotlight on how the marketing discipline can contribute to maintaining and fostering social sustainability in Germany through its knowledge, tools, and methods by tackling two of Germany's biggest challenges: social inequality and social divide. We first introduce the social challenges and their detrimental effects on social cohesion as supported by current metrics. Then, guided by the 5Ps of marketing (Booms & Bitner, 1981), we provide first

solutions to tackle these challenges, present current examples from practice, and provide avenues for future research.

In sum, this paper aims to draw attention within the marketing discipline, particularly the German community, to some of the most pressing issues of the early 21st century in Germany—rising inequalities and social divide.

2. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND ITS UPTAKE BY THE MARKETING DISCIPLINE

2.1 Defining Social Sustainability and Social Challenges

Social Sustainability. Social sustainability has not been uniformly defined in the literature (McGuinn et al., 2020; Richter et al., 2023) and has been embedded with ecological and economic sustainability in different foundational models with varying logics (Dragicevic, 2018, 2020; Elkington, 1994, 2004). While some definitions in marketing literature are more general, pragmatic, and organization-related such as, "(…) an organization's positive and negative impact on the society (e.g., employees, consumers, suppliers, or institutions)" (Larivière & Smit, 2022; Zechiel et al., 2024, p. 77); others from related disciplines are more detailed, name specific social challenges, and include various actors (e.g., communities, individuals) but are rather complex to grasp (e.g., McGuinn et al., 2020; McKenzie, 2004). Because tackling social sustainability challenges on a wider scale needs actions from various actors and focus on the creation and maintenance of specific social aspects, we build on previous definitions and define social sustainability as:

> *… the ability of a society to maintain and support social well-being over the long*
>
> *term. It involves the creation and maintenance of equitable, inclusive, and cohesive*
>
> *communities that meet the needs of all members, both present and future, through the*
>
> *actions of various actors, including communities, private and public organizations,*

and individuals. This includes ensuring access to basic care (such as food, education, healthcare, housing, and safety), fostering equal opportunities for participation and empowerment, and promoting inclusion and social cohesion (Dempsey et al., 2011; Littig & Griessler, 2005; McGuinn et al., 2020; Vallance et al., 2011; Vavik & Keitsch, 2010).

Moreover, we understand social sustainability as embedded with economic and ecological sustainability, following a nested sustainability approach (Dragicevic, 2020) that has recently gained attention in the marketing literature (e.g., Haenlein et al., 2022; Zechiel et al., 2024).

Social Challenges. Our social sustainability definition already includes central indicators (e.g., access to education and healthcare, social cohesion and inclusion, and equal opportunity) that aid us in identifying potential challenges for marketing to tackle for fostering social sustainability. Highlighting common and global social problems has been regularly done by governments (e.g., U.S. Agency for International Development, 2024) , foundations (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2023), or international organizations (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals (SDG); United Nations, 2015) to spur collaboration to solve these problems. Following fellow business scholars (George et al. 2016), we use a slightly modified definition to refer to *social* challenges as "(…)specific *critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important [social] problem with a high likelihood of [systemic] impact through widespread implementation*" (George et al., 2016, p. 1881; Grand Challenges Canada, 2024). With the added '*social'* we put our focus on challenges that specifically adhere to problems that challenge social sustainability in human societies. Our rationale for replacing 'global' with '*systematic*' impact was to emphasize that social challenges are woven into greater societal structures/ecosystems that cannot be resolved by individual behavioral changes alone (e.g., McKenzie, 2004). In our work, we focus on the

case of Germany. While Germany is amongst the wealthiest countries in the world, it suffers from increasing social challenges (German Government, 2023). We will introduce these in detail in section three.

2.2 Social Sustainability is not a Ground Zero in Marketing Literature - but Social Issues are still Growing

Within the realm of marketing research, social sustainability has gained momentum in the past decade. Traditionally, marketing has been profit-oriented, focusing on driving demand for products and services by addressing consumer needs and wants (Carroll, 1991). However, growing societal and particularly consumer expectations and general guidelines, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) or the societal impact regulations of the AACSB 2020 Business Accreditation Standards (AACSB, 2025), have compelled businesses and researchers to evolve. Companies are no longer seen solely as economic entities but as social institutions with responsibilities toward their communities (Carroll, 1991; George et al., 2016), and the marketing discipline is increasingly considered a research field that carries responsibility for social sustainability. Consequently, marketing—as a key business function and vast research community—had to adapt, address, and incorporate social sustainability principles (Carroll, 1991).

Key concepts highlight the incorporation of social sustainability into marketing literature. For instance, *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) and the *shared value approach* involve corporate efforts to contribute to community development, environmental protection, and consumer welfare. Carroll (1991) and Porter and Kramer (2006) emphasized that CSR extends beyond philanthropy. They argue that integrating social objectives into core business strategies rather than treating them as secondary priorities (Porter & Kramer, 2006) can achieve economic success, for example, by developing fair trade strategies or products for underserved communities (Dembek et al., 2016). *Corporate digital responsibility* (CDR),

building on CSR, emphasizes ethical and transparent digital practices, addressing issues like data privacy and digital inclusion (Wirtz et al., 2023). *Transformative services* (TS) aim to create positive societal change, enhance the quality of life, and foster equity through service systems in areas like healthcare and education (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). Moreover, TS researchers call for a focus on consumers at the bottom of the pyramid (Fisk et al., 2016). While CSR, CDR, and TS concepts initially focus on organizations and their impact on individual stakeholders (e.g., consumers, employees, regional community stakeholders), the concepts have evolved over time to also include wider social sustainability issues.

Recently, concepts in marketing literature put a focus on these wider social challenges and more systemic approaches, such as *social profit orientation*, which refers to companies that actively allocate resources to systemic challenges, promoting ethical consumption and social investment (Berry et al., 2024). *Responsible stakeholder engagement marketing* focuses on a firm's strategic measures to stimulate and empower their stakeholders for responsible action that ought to fuel systemic changes (Kumar et al., 2025). Furthermore, *public value innovation* emphasizes collaborations between public and private entities to tackle wider social challenges, such as poverty reduction, through innovative products and services (George et al., 2016; Spanjol et al., 2024). In contrast to traditional market value innovation, public value innovations aim to achieve collective goals and benefit society as a whole beyond singular private or public profiteers (e.g., shareholders, consumers, the state; Crosby et al., 2017; Spanjol et al., 2024).

While these developments point towards a changing focus, much of the existing marketing literature addresses social sustainability within organizational boundaries, focusing on internal practices rather than overarching societal challenges. Critical scholars argue that the prevailing neoliberal capitalist mindset, which prioritizes market-driven solutions, may inadvertently undermine long-term social sustainability by neglecting systemic change and

urge organizations to rethink standing thought models (Gordon & Vink, 2024; Porter & Kramer, 2019). Moreover, while research has addressed social sustainability issues, these issues concurrently seem to grow in countries like Germany, speaking for a considerable gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application as well as missing representation of extant role models from marketing practice promoting social sustainability. Recent initiatives from marketing scholars, such as the Responsible Research in Business and Management Marketing Initiative (2025), Serv Collab (2025), and the 2024 established *Journal of Social Impact in Business Research* as well as emerging special issues (e.g., Bharadwaj et al., 2025; Büttgen et al., 2023), editorials (e.g., Haenlein et al., 2022), and marketing books (e.g., Bruhn & Hadwich, 2024), underline the importance of continued emphasis on social sustainability issues in marketing research and, crucially, transferring research results for a sustainable transformation of practices.

3. GERMANY'S PARAMOUNT SOCIAL CHALLENGES: INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL DIVIDE

We identify *income* and *wealth inequalities* and *social divide* as two of Germany's biggest social challenges, based on studies and metrics from governmental (e.g., Federal Agency for Civic Education (FACE), German Government Reports, OECD) and non-governmental (e.g., German Institute for Economic Research, SDG Watch Europe, Statista, World Economic Forum, World Inequality Database) institutions that provide guidance on social sustainability issues with detailed reports or statistics. Even though Germany is amongst the top three richest countries in the world (Statista, 2024b), studying the metrics in global reports points towards increasing inequality that, paired with unequal opportunities, fuels social divide (e.g., political radicalization; SDG Watch Europe, 2019). For instance, in Germany, social mobility is highly dependent on education, which in turn is highly dependent

on household income (Dräger, 2022). Accordingly, the 2024 WEF's global risk report puts "erosion of social cohesion" enhanced through increasing inequalities under the top five risks for Germany (WEF, 2024, p. 105). We therefore put a focus on *inequalities* (i.e., income and wealth distribution and equal opportunities) and *social divide* on various levels: (1) cultural, (2) generational, and (3) political in our work.

Increasing inequalities fuel social divide because they change the social contexts in which different people live and erode social bonds (Jencks, 2002). Broken social bonds in combination with economic inequalities can increase feelings of deprivation relative to another social group and undermine contact with other social groups which can lead to increased social divide (Jencks, 2002; Stewart et al., 2020). This dynamic is not only an ethical problem but can seriously affect social and economic prosperity. For example, the widening gap between rich and poor in combination with rising prices and stagnating incomes can lead to more savings by richer households (i.e., the share of savings increases compared to consumption). At the same time, poorer households struggle to pay for their basic needs which even further decreases consumption. Moreover, inequalities and social divide could dilute the merit principle (i.e., those who achieve more earn more), as performance has less and less impact on moving socially upward (Kieselbach, 2020; Kontio, 2016). This can negatively impact motivation, satisfaction, and performance in work and education settings (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2023). Taken together, these dynamic can have a negative impact on domestic demand, economic growth, and employment rates, assuming that these are central measures of a successful economy (Butterwegge, 2024; Zinn, 2006). In the long term, a seemingly immutable social divide can lead to riots and unrest (as already observed in other economies) and thus significantly threaten a country's economic activities (Østby, 2008). Our framework (see Figure 1) depicts the focus of our work and illustrates our line of thought.
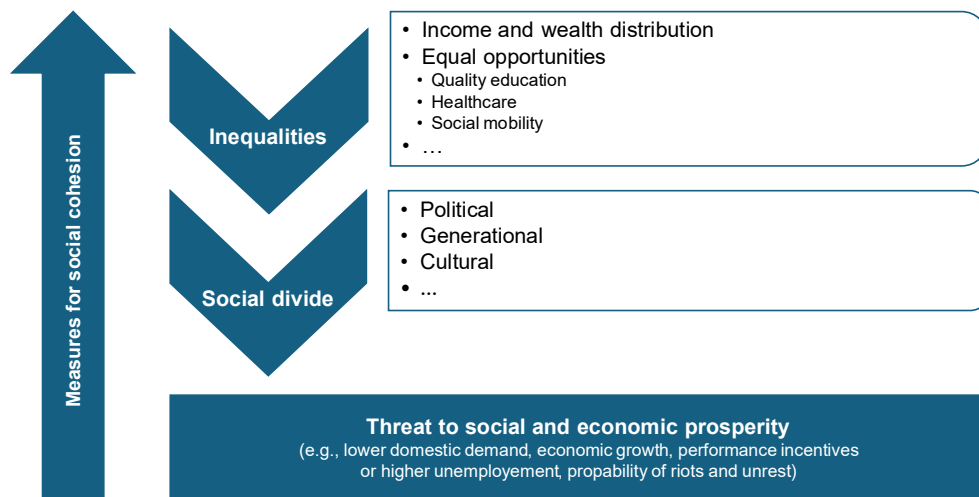
Figure 1. Overview of social challenges addressed in this work and their potential interplay

We fully acknowledge that social challenges are complex, intertwined, and have different effects on individuals which makes a generalization difficult. We also acknowledge that social challenges are much more intertwined than our framework suggests. However, to have a workable starting point for marketing to foster social sustainability in Germany, we simplified our model to the statement: inequalities consisting of unequal income and wealth distribution as well as unequal opportunities have an increasing effect on social divide. To foster social sustainability in Germany, marketing knowledge, concepts, and methods can help tackle these two intertwined major social challenges.

3.1 Social Inequality Challenges

3.1.1 Income and Wealth Distribution

While incomes in Germany have continuously risen throughout the past years (World Inequality Database, 2025), income distribution highlights significant disparity. A recently published analysis of tax data (Frieden et al., 2023) shows that in 1998, the richest ten percent of taxpayers earned 33.8 percent of total income. In 2016, that figure rose to 37.2 percent.

Over the same period, the poorest 50 percent's share of income fell from 19.3 percent to 15.9 percent. More recent data confirms this trend. In 2020, 10% of top earners are paid 25.5% (5.106 €) of the overall available net income while the bottom 50% share almost the same percentage (25.4%; 1.020 €) (FACE, 2024; Giesecke et al., 2024).

Recent data on wealth distribution shows a similar trend, indicating that the top ten percent of Germany's population holds around two-thirds (67%) of the nation's wealth while the bottom 50% possesses almost no wealth or even negative net worth due to debt (Giesecke et al., 2024). In 2020, the top ten households were 100 times richer than the bottom half (Albers et al., 2020). Furthermore, while being among the richest countries in the European Union, Germany's Gini Coefficient remains around .03 (Eurostat, 2024), showing medium inequality just below the European average, and the poverty rate is continuously rising from 14.5% in 2010 to 16.6% in 2023 (Statista, 2024a). The unequal taxation of labor and capital income (Causa et al., 2018; OECD, 2019) and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have fueled this inequality, widening the wealth gap and increasing the risk of poverty even further (Bobrovnikova et al., 2023). Wealth and income inequality are also critical barriers to equal opportunity and social mobility (Giesecke et al., 2024), undermining the SDG targets for reduced inequalities (SDG 10) and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8).

3.1.2 Equal Opportunities

In Germany, the principle of equal opportunity faces substantial challenges across education, healthcare, and social mobility, reinforcing cycles of inequality (FACE, 2024). Despite a commitment to meritocracy, where success is theoretically based on individual performance, structural barriers limit the ability of many to achieve upward mobility (OECD, 2018). In particular, education, social security systems such as the pension system, and the healthcare system represent critical areas of disparity.

Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have significantly reduced access to *quality education*, contributing to systemic inequality. According to the Federal Agency for Civic Education (FACE, 2023), children from lower-income families are three times more likely to leave school without a diploma and are far less likely to qualify for university entrance. The German education system places children on diverging paths early on (mostly after 4th grade), shaping their long-term opportunities (Dräger, 2022). Research indicates that parental wealth remains amongst the best predictor of a child's educational success and future earnings, revealing a limited impact of policy measures aimed at promoting social mobility among lower-income groups through education (Dräger, 2022).

Healthcare disparities further emphasize these inequalities. While Germany generally has a functioning and affordable healthcare system, it aches under increasing costs partly due to demographic change and lack of healthcare professionals leading to increased costs for healthcare for all citizen, particularly for those in the statutory health insurance, with worse quality (FACE, 2022). Studies by the Robert Koch Institute (2024) reveal that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face a higher risk of chronic illnesses and reduced life expectancy. This group experiences increased exposure to risk factors such as poor nutrition, limited healthcare access, and environmental hazards, correlating with socioeconomic status (Robert Koch Institute, 2024). Health inequities also relate to systemic crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impact those with fewer resources to adapt or recover (Bobrovnikova et al., 2023). Such disparities can also compound mental health issues and fears of social descent, particularly among the most vulnerable (Bobrovnikova et al., 2023).

Social mobility in Germany remains closely tied to family background, as seen in entrepreneurship and access to higher-status professions. For instance, data from the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024) shows that 60% of startup founders come from families where at

least one parent holds an academic degree, with a quarter of founders reporting a family background in business. This illustrates how academic and entrepreneurial models play a crucial role in shaping opportunities, often leaving those from non-academic or working-class backgrounds with fewer pathways to success.

In sum, while Germany espouses a commitment to equal opportunity, existing structures within education, healthcare, and social mobility reveal persistent disparities that hinder the realization of this ideal, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3.2 Social Divide Challenges

Social divides have traditionally been defined in terms of ideological or political cleavages. This perspective focuses on the measurable differences in beliefs, values, and political affiliations between groups within a society (McCoy et al., 2018). Social divides are often rooted in social and cultural differences, including ethnicity, religion, gender, and other forms of group identity, and can lead to polarization (Carling, 1991). Moreover, differences in access to resources, opportunities, and infrastructure, that is, social inequality issues, can create significant disparities and thereby fuel social divide between different population groups such as between urban and rural areas or between different regions within a country (Krieger et al., 2018). In Germany, this is evident in the differences in prevailing income and economic infrastructure between the eastern and western parts of Germany (Büchel & Röhl, 2023). McCoy et al. (2018) define social divide or polarization beyond a mere divergence of opinions and highlight the inherently relational nature of the phenomenon. Polarization is not simply about differing beliefs; it is about the *way* those differences are perceived and experienced. It is a process by which the usual multiplicity of differences within a society increasingly align along a single, dominant dimension, often framed as an "Us vs. Them" dichotomy (McCoy et al., 2018). In Germany, social divide can be observed due to political, demographic, and cultural (marginalized groups) differences.

First, when looking at the *political* divide, voting behavior in Germany has increasingly shifted toward the edges of the political spectrum (Herold et al., 2023; Statista, 2024c). This shift can not only be seen in voting behavior but also in the media coverage of several political debates. For example, when looking at the migration debate, opinions have increasingly focused either on strict rejection or unregulated migration. On the one hand, the strict rejection of migration (beyond legal obligations) ignores the fact that migration has played a major role in Germany's economic miracle after the Second World War and, additionally, its role as a central building block to maintain economic ability to act (e.g., in healthcare, construction,…) (Fratzscher, 2024). On the other hand, unregulated migration places high demands on the capacities of municipalities and their administrations (Schayani, 2024). A middle ground seems increasingly lost in the media coverage, fueling the political divide. While in Germany, public broadcasting is already widespread and provides access to reliable and differentiated information, trust in and use of these services has been shrinking in the past years (Jackob et al., 2023) and people, especially young people, use more unregulated sources such as social media to get information (Harenberg, 2024). However, such sources are more prone to fake news that can fuel political divide (Reglitz, 2022). Potentially exacerbating this effect, major platforms such as X and Instagram announced to cut their fact-checking entities (Adam, 2025). The German political divide becomes evident as established political parties lose voters to extreme right or left parties. For example, the *Alternative für Deutschland,* which is officially deemed "extreme-right" and the second strongest political party according to recent polls, and the 2024 founded party *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* that avails populist positions from the left and the right spectrum could jump the 5% hurdle to enter parliament in 2025 (Thomeczek, 2024).

Second, an increasing *generational* divide shapes both societal attitudes and political landscapes, creating tensions between older and younger generations in Germany (Melcher & Goffart, 2024). Many older adults perceive younger people as contributing less to society,

reflecting a longstanding, recurrent conflict (Melcher & Goffart, 2024). At the same time, Deloitte's yearly Gen Z and Millennials studies show that the younger generations face distinct challenges: their education was heavily impacted by the pandemic, they bear the brunt of climate change, economic instability, and the effects of an aging population (Deloitte, 2021, 2023). Millennials, meanwhile, grapple with failing generational contracts, supporting an unprecedented number of retirees while also providing care for younger children and aging relatives—responsibilities that stretch both time and income (Deloitte, 2021, 2023). The structural strain is compounded by the political influence of older generations, who constitute a significant voter base. People over 60 account for nearly 40% of eligible voters, with those above 70 representing the largest single group (22%). In contrast, voters under 30 make up only 15% of the electorate, younger people generally vote less consistently (Statista, 2022), and children who cannot actively vote have no dedicated representative. This demographic skew influences policy directions, as political actors often prioritize the short-term needs of older constituents over structural reforms that would benefit future generations (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2024). The average age of members of the German parliament exceeds that of the general population, highlighting how decisions may lean towards the preferences of older citizens, who are already more politically active (German Parliament, 2022). In response, some young people express frustration, feeling burdened by rising living costs, housing prices, and their role as primary financiers of a retiring baby-boomer generation (Deloitte, 2023; Roppert & Appel, 2024). This intergenerational tension reflects broader societal challenges around fairness, sustainability, and the distribution of economic responsibilities in a rapidly aging country.

Third, *cultural divide* is imminent. Even though Germany is a liberal country, accepting different lifestyles, and has religious freedom as a core value, a decrease of openness towards marginalized groups seems to occur. For example, opinion polls, and figures on hate crime indicate a decrease in acceptance of the queer community, people of

color, people with a migration history, and people with non-Christian religions (Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, 2024; Ipsos, 2023). There are also diverging trends regarding gender roles that could separate social groups. While in modern relationships, usually both partners share economic and social responsibilities, traditional gender roles get increasingly promoted and put back into fashion by influential personas on social media. For instance, young men orientate on influencers that provide guidance on how to be a 'real man' (i.e., Alpha Males), and the so-called trad wife trend showcases women who aim to take the classical housewife role while being financially secured by their husbands without an income on their own (Bell & Oquendo, 2024; Klaes, 2023).

4 THE MARKETING DISCIPLINE'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

To analyze the impact of marketing in tackling social sustainability challenges, we rely on the well-established, classic 5P model of marketing strategy (Meffert et al., 2024). This model is suitable to structure our ideas on how the marketing discipline can support social sustainability as it covers the core of traditional marketing strategy activities and has been used to assess marketing impact on sustainability issues (e.g., Rudawska, 2019; Sheth et al., 2011). The 5Ps of marketing—Product, Price, Promotion, Place, and People—form a foundational framework for designing and evaluating marketing strategies. Initially conceived as the 4Ps by McCarthy (1960), the model was later expanded by Booms and Bitner (1981) to include "People", particularly relevant for service industries where human interaction is pivotal. "Product" focuses on the development of goods or services tailored to meet consumer needs. "Price" addresses strategic pricing to reflect the product's value while ensuring competitiveness. "Promotion" involves communication strategies to engage and persuade potential consumers, while "Place" concerns the optimization of distribution channels to ensure product availability to the target market. The addition of "People" underscores the role

of all human elements, such as staff and consumers, as well as their interactions, in influencing, for example, brand perception and consumer satisfaction (Booms & Bitner, 1981; Meffert et al., 2024).

Leveraging the 5Ps model, we provide first ideas, examples from practice, and future research avenues for marketing to tackle two major social sustainability challenges in Germany: inequalities (see Table 1) and social divide (see Table 2).

4.1 Marketing's Role to Reduce Inequalities

Product innovations play a critical role in addressing inequalities by catering to underserved groups of the population. (Re-)Designing frugal and social innovations can alleviate systemic barriers faced by low-income households. With co-design methods, in particular by including disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals, and product development strategies, marketing could support and further develop the creation and/or redesign for increased accessibility and inclusiveness of new products and services (Trischler et al., 2019). Moreover, with insights from transformative service research, marketing could support the redesign of civil service systems (e.g., public employment agencies, healthcare) that avoid bureaucracy and focus on citizens' well-being enhancement (e.g., Henkel et al., 2020). Finally, marketing could support the strategic and artificial intelligence-enabled development of educational services (digital and non-digital) that are tailored to students from low-income households. There are already products (e.g., Fairphone or Solarkiosk,) and initiatives in practice like Arbeiterkind (eng: working-class child) or Aufsteiger (eng: social climber) that demonstrate how tailored mentoring and support systems can enhance opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds and alleviate inequalities. *Future research* could investigate how companies can expand or redesign their portfolios to include affordable products that serve the bottom of the pyramid. Another critical avenue involves reimagining educational support systems (e.g., mentoring and scholarship programs) to better reach

students from low-income families through digital and non-digital innovations. Additionally, researchers could explore how marketing methods might identify drivers and barriers to the acceptance of inclusive services development and generally social system transformations.

Price strategies offer another promising avenue to tackle economic inequalities. Applying extant marketing knowledge of variable pricing models, such as "pay what you want / pay what you can" or personalized pricing (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Santana & Morwitz, 2021), might enable low-income households to access essential goods and services and foster social participation. Moreover, alternative buying options, such as group buying, allowing people in neighborhoods or friends and family to buy items as a group which lowers the price per item when buying in bulk. Companies like Tomorrow Bank and Dealcart have successfully implemented such models, allowing consumers to contribute flexibly based on their financial capabilities or facilitate group buying deals. *Future marketing research* might determine the optimal level of variable pricing that balances financial sustainability with accessibility. Additionally, marketing could investigate which products and services are most suitable for such pricing approaches, ensuring that these strategies are impactful and feasible. Another area of interest could be how pricing models could contribute to sustainable wealth distribution.

Based on our analysis, *promotion* offers the most options to tackle inequalities from a marketing perspective as professional communication strategies and market research can reshape societal narratives, increase visibility, and, in turn, profitability for organizations tackling economic inequalities. Understanding consumers' and (potential) employees' perceptions of companies that prioritize transparency and pay their fair share of taxes—even voluntarily paying more—can offer valuable insights. Companies that support independent organizations working to expose woke or social washing practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020), demonstrate their commitment to accountability. For example, adhering to independent social

labels can signal credibility and authenticity. Co-design of corporate branding campaigns or even job advertisements, including consumers and potential employees who particularly value companies' societal dedication, might additionally contribute to credible communication of respective companies. These efforts may help increase visibility and enhance (employer) brand value, particularly when targeting the right audience. An example from practice for a global initiative that addresses economic inequalities is taxmenow. Here, wealthy people speak out in favor of higher taxes. In Germany, BASF heiress Marlene Engelhorn is one of the co-founders. Promotion can also amplify the visibility of existing public services and NGO initiatives, such as work-related consultations or health support, particularly for marginalized groups. Moreover, volunteering opportunities could be marketed more professionally to reach a wider audience and be included in internal marketing efforts for employees. Furthermore, companies that authentically and truthfully invest in social policies could promote this in their communication and serve as role models—a prime example for this from Germany is the outdoor fashion brand Vaude. *Future research* could focus on how companies can leverage tax honesty and social investments in their brand communications to enhance their reputations. Furthermore, studies might examine how campaigns advocating income redistribution, like taxmenow Germany, could benefit from new marketing approaches beyond traditional advertising.

Place considerations can also be critical in mitigating inequalities. Locating shops in underserved areas not only improves access to goods and services but also fosters community development. Collaborations between businesses (e.g., shared shop floors) and governments (e.g., reduced rents, easier access to properties) could ensure that these efforts are both impactful and sustainable. Marketing analytics can help to identify the needs of underserved communities to attract stores with fitting products or provide insights on how to develop communities' points of sale. For example, Buxton provides marketing insights to communities to attract grocery stores to underserved areas. Starbucks set the goal to open 100

stores in underserved communities by 2025. *Future research* could explore the branding implications of shop locations in segregated communities, particularly how such decisions influence brand perception and long-term value, even if they are less profitable in the short term.

Finally, *people*-related considerations can reduce inequalities by promoting inclusivity within organizations. For example, developing mentoring and training programs that target employees from low-income households could foster upward mobility. Human resources marketing and employer branding can also play a pivotal role in attracting and supporting talent from diverse economic backgrounds. For example, Amazon invested $1.2 billion in an upskilling initiative for their employees. Moreover, internal marketing could consider how to design and promote transparent and fair salary systems. A radical example from practice being Gravity Payments' salary redistribution where the CEOs salary was cut significantly to pay all employees a yearly salary of at least $70k, including respective communication of this decision. *Future research* could investigate how HR marketing segmentation techniques might identify and address the needs of employees from low-income households effectively. Moreover, exploring how organizations can use market research knowledge for job market analyses to design targeted interventions would provide valuable insights. Finally, it could also be impactful to investigate the effects of different income transparency models to reduce income inequality.

Table 1. Marketing's potential to tackle inequalities

	Marketing's potential and practical examples	Future Research
Product	▪ (Re-)Designing and implementing frugal products and services available for different incomes (e.g., in healthcare, products serving customers at the bottom of the pyramid) ▪ (Re-)Designing civil services that avoid bureaucracy and enhance citizen well-being ▪ (Re-)Designing digital and non-digital products and services especially for consumers from low-income backgrounds (e.g., educational services, financial products) ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: <u>Fairphone</u>, <u>Solarkiosk</u>, <u>Arbeiterkind</u> (eng: working-class child), or <u>Aufsteiger</u> (eng: social climber) initiative	▪ How can companies (re-)design their portfolio with products and services supporting frugality, inclusivity, and serving consumers on the bottom of the pyramid? ▪ How can educational services be (re-)designed to reach and support students from low-income backgrounds? ▪ How can marketing research methods help understand drivers and barriers to accepting social systems' transformation?
Price	▪ Considering variable pricing to support access to products to low-income households (e.g., pay what you want, pay what you can) ▪ Considering pricing options such as paying for the following consumer ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: Pay what you want option by <u>Tomorrow Bank</u>, group buying deals for everyday items by <u>Dealcart</u>	▪ How can marketing metrics help to investigate success rates and identify the optimal level of variable pricing? ▪ How can marketing research help identify products and services for which such pricing is most useful? ▪ How can pricing strategies support wealth redistribution?

Promotion	▪ Understanding consumers' perception of companies that pay <u>more</u> or are very transparent with their taxes and social security payments / that do <u>not</u> avoid tax payments and design fitting communication campaigns
	▪ Disclosing companies' social washing activities, promoting independent rating organizations
	▪ Promoting …
	   ○ … entrepreneurs and company executives from low-income backgrounds as role models
	   ○ … existing public and NGOs' social and health offers (e.g., offers from unions)
	   ○ … volunteering opportunities and donation options
	▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: <u>taxmenow</u> initiative, <u>Vaude</u> communication/role model for social and ecological sustainability
		▪ How can companies that do not avoid tax payments/invest in social policy making (e.g., Vaude) leverage this for their brand communication? How to create campaigns for tax honesty?
		▪ How can marketing increase the visibility of campaigns that challenge the status quo and aim to tackle income and wealth distribution (e.g., taxmenow)? Are there other advertising practices needed besides the traditional approaches?
		▪ What impact could good role models have (e.g., companies, tax initiatives from other countries)?

Place	▪ Considering shop locations in segregated communities, collaborating with government and other businesses to mitigate marginalization ▪ Use marketing analytics to identify the needs of underserved communities to attract stores with fitting products; provide insights on how to develop communities' points of sale ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: <u>Buxton</u> provides marketing insights to communities to attract grocery stores to underserved areas; <u>Starbucks</u> opens stores in underserved communities	▪ How can marketing methods help understand the effects of diverse shop locations on brand value? For example, even if a shop in a segregated area is less profitable, does it positively affect brand value?
People	▪ Designing and promoting development and mentoring programs with a focus on employees from low-income households ▪ Designing and promoting transparent and fair salary systems ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: <u>Amazon</u>'s upskilling initiative; <u>Gravity Payment</u>'s salary redistribution and its salary model's promotion	▪ How to use marketing research methods for job market analyses and segmentation to identify and effectively address appropriate employees from low-income households? ▪ How can HR marketing/employer branding help overcome income inequality?

4.2 Marketing's Role to Reduce Social Divide

Product strategies can directly address the needs of marginalized groups by incorporating their demands into product and service design. Marketing could develop tools and processes for more inclusivity. For example, co-design processes that engage individuals from the queer community, people with disabilities, or those with migration backgrounds can ensure inclusivity and accessibility. Moreover, marketing could support (re-)designing products and services that can potentially fuel social divide. For example, high-quality media services beyond click-bait and more transformative services for vulnerable groups could be developed. In practice, Perspective daily and Articlett already provide affordable, high-quality, solution-oriented articles and flexible pricing models; and the AV1 robot helps students attend school when they are unable to be there physically, for example, due to long-term illness. *Future research* could explore participatory and co-design practices that foster collaboration and mutual understanding among diverse consumer groups and what it needs for such practices to be widely adopted. Additionally, developing tools to mediate conflicts between different interest groups during product design could enhance social sustainability in development processes.

Price models can also play a crucial role in tackling the social divide, particularly in the media sector. Alternative pricing strategies (in combination with price-aligned, target group-specific promotion) of high-quality media allow low-income groups access to reliable information while wealthier consumers can spend more to keep media services alive. Such pricing strategies might help to avoid reliance on unethical journalism practices like clickbait, which often exacerbates polarization. For example, the Correspondent follows a chose-what-you-pay model with the particular aim to make reliable journalism available for all. Another example is Wikipedia and its annual conspicuous call for donations, transparently reporting on the current amount of donations aligned to the target value needed to keep its platform viable and accessible for everyone without paying for a single information service. *Future*

research could focus on identifying pricing strategies that enhance the quality of products and services while ensuring affordability and ethical practices. Moreover, marketing could explore profitable yet socially responsible target markets and pricing models that reduce the dependency on advertising revenue, fostering, for example, high-quality and unbiased journalism and information services.

Promotion can reshape public narratives to foster inclusivity and challenge divisive practices. For instance, advertising campaigns promoting diversity and inclusion can inspire societal change, though they must be carefully designed to avoid reactance or rebound effects, or superficial gestures. Marketing can support campaigns that foster public participation. Moreover, the case of famous entrepreneur <u>Würth</u> who wrote a letter to employees advocating against far-right politics illustrates how communicating core values internally and externally can align brands with positive societal impacts. Other initiatives from practice initiated by German businesses that make an open stand for social cohesion and against divide are: <u>We stand for values</u>, <u>Made in Germany, made by Vielfalt (eng: Diversity)</u> or <u>Fashion against Fascism</u>. Marketing can also advertise the use of open databases that show what companies are doing to promote social cohesion and leverage its methods to analyze the effectiveness of different measures. *Future research* might examine what potential rebound/negative effects current advertising and communication campaigns to increase diversity and inclusion might have and what new approaches could avoid them. Moreover, research might focus on determining storytelling and branding techniques that effectively increase societal diversity and inclusiveness. Furthermore, marketing could support the development of open databases showcasing company efforts toward social sustainability and develop fitting social sustainability labels.

Place strategies should prioritize inclusivity and safety for marginalized groups. (Re-)designing accessible online and offline points of sale ensures that all consumers can

participate in commerce comfortably. Moreover, marketing could support the development of safety measures in offline points of sale for groups who are subject to hostility. For example, Mindscreen offers UX workshops to foster eInclusion and eAccessibility and EDEKA supermarkets offer *silent hour* without music and dimmed lights to accommodate individuals with sensory sensitivities. Another path could be to (re-)design online and offline spaces for civic exchange (e.g. for participation in municipal and political debates, thereby considering newer channels to reach younger people such as Twitch. *Future research* is needed to understand how marketing methods can contribute to creating distribution channels that are both inclusive and safe. Additionally, collaborations between businesses and communities could ensure that these initiatives effectively address the specific needs of vulnerable or marginalized populations. Marketing could also further explore what platforms and approaches are most effective in reaching young consumers, and understanding their opinions, perspectives, and motivations better. One approach here could be to make use of platforms such as Twitch where the majority of users are under 24 years old (Statista, 2025).

Complementary to consumer-oriented strategies*, people-focused strategies* aim to cultivate open and diverse workplace environments. Internal marketing can shape employee attitudes and behaviors, promoting inclusiveness and mitigating social divides within organizations. Announcing clear hiring guidelines that oppose radical or fascist views can foster diversity and uphold human rights. For example, Ben & Jerry's values include inclusiveness and activism for social good and have been cultivated and ingrained in the organization for decades; retailer Kaufland educates employees on everyday racism, its impact on consumers and their own workforce and how to stop it via internal communication. *Future research* could investigate whether recent increases in diversity within promotional and communication campaigns or specific job advertisements have been effective and identify innovative approaches to enhance inclusivity through HR marketing. Moreover, exploring

internal processes that reinforce diversity, inclusiveness, and equality could provide valuable

frameworks for organizational transformation toward social cohesion.

Table 2. Marketing's potential to tackle social divide

	Marketing's potential and practical examples	Future research
Product	▪ Developing practices and tools that allow implementing demands of marginalized groups (e.g., queer community) into products and services and/or moderate conflicts between different interest groups (e.g., through social innovation or co-design processes) ▪ (Re-)designing products and services for more inclusiveness, accessibility, and social cohesion (e.g., high-quality media services; transformative robotic services) ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: <u>Perspective daily</u> and <u>Articlett</u> provide affordable, high-quality, solution-oriented articles ; <u>AV1 robot</u> helps students attend school	▪ What are good practices for the co-creation of products and services including different consumer groups? ▪ How can marketing boost the adoption of such practices in product and service design through participatory or co-design processes (e.g., in public services)?
Price	▪ Designing alternative price or fee models for media services to avoid unethical journalism practices such as click bait with social divide implications ▪ <u>Example from practice</u>: the <u>Correspondent</u> follows a chose-what-you-pay model; <u>Wikipedia</u> the free encyclopedia	▪ What pricing strategies for media and other services can decrease the reliance on advertising and in turn increase quality and decrease unethical journalism practices (e.g., overly polarizing headlines and articles)?
Promotion	▪ Promoting public participation programs (e.g., petitions, citizen participation formats) ▪ Promoting and living respective core values of executives both internally and externally ▪ Support open databases that show what companies are doing to promote social cohesion, use marketing methods to analyze (e.g., effectiveness) ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: Initiative of German businesses <u>We stand for values</u>, <u>Made in Germany, made by Vielfalt</u> (eng: Diversity) or <u>Fashion against Fascism</u>; Entrepreneur <u>Würth</u> wrote an open letter to the employees taking an open stand against far-right politics	▪ What are potential rebound/negative effects of current advertising and communication campaigns aiming at increasing diversity and inclusion and what new approaches could avoid them? ▪ What are storytelling and branding approaches to increase societal diversity and inclusiveness, how can their effectiveness be measured, and how effective are they? ▪ How can marketing campaigns help change companies', managers', and employees' perceptions of people with vulnerabilities in the job market and support integration?
Place	▪ (Re-)designing online and offline points of sale for inclusivity and accessibility ▪ Developing safety measures for marginalized groups who are often subject to hostility at points of sale ▪ (Re-)designing online and offline spaces for civic exchange (e.g., for participation in municipal and political debates; consider channels to reach younger people, e.g., Twitch) ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: <u>Mindscreen</u> offers UX workshops to foster eInclusion and eAccessibility; <u>EDEKA</u> supermarkets offer *silent hours* without music and dimmed lights	▪ How can marketing methods support (re-)designing distribution channels to be inclusive and safe for all? ▪ How should points of sale be designed for different consumer groups to feel safe and welcome? What effects would such a design have on the loyalty of all consumer groups? ▪ What marketing approaches are most effective for engaging consumers in channels such as Twitch?
People	▪ Creating an open and diverse working environment with clear hiring guidelines against radical, fascist views ▪ Internal marketing to shape employee attitudes and behavior to avoid social divide ▪ <u>Examples from practice</u>: <u>Ben & Jerry's</u> values incl. inclusiveness and activism for social good on their open blog, <u>Kaufland</u> educates employees on everyday racism, its impact on different stakeholders, and how to stop it	▪ What might be new ways to increase diversity through internal and external HR marketing? ▪ How can internal processes be shaped to increase diversity, inclusiveness, and accessibility?

5. CONCLUSION

The social realities in Germany are changing; social problems have been smoldering for years. There will be turning points when core societal systems, as they are in place now, will crumble (e.g., the retirement system due to the baby boomers, currently entering retirement). Without action social issues might grow even further—however, the marketing discipline can contribute its share to develop actionable solutions. This article sheds light on social sustainability by raising awareness of and summarizing two of Germany's big social challenges, namely increasing inequalities and social divide. It also provides ideas, examples and future research avenues for the marketing discipline to tackle these challenges along the 5P model. Social inequalities increase because of rising income and wealth divergence and unequal opportunities. Hence, population groups from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds increasingly face reduced access to quality education, higher health risks, and lower social advancement opportunities. This fuels a social divide in Germany between political, generational, and cultural groups. Inequality and social divide can, for example, have negative effects on domestic demand, economic growth, unemployment, achievement motivation (in education and work) and increase the likelihood of riots and unrest, that threaten Germany's social and economic prosperity (Østby, 2008).

Therefore, we urge marketing scholars to promote and expand existing initiatives (cf. section 4) and apply marketing knowledge and methods to overcome these social challenges and increase social sustainability. In the article, we present a variety of research opportunities within the 5P model of marketing practices to reduce inequalities and the social divide. Marketing researchers can use these as a guide for further research. However, we also acknowledge that the remarks within this article are holistic, and social challenges, which are nested within ecological and economic sustainability, are more complex and mutually conflicting (Dragicevic, 2018, 2020). While we believe that a holistic view helps start

investigating social challenges, we call on researchers to also identify and investigate social sustainability within its full complexity.

Additionally, so far, it has been unusual for marketing researchers to articulate policy implications. We believe that marketing research (and business research in general) can take a moderating and self-critical position between social sustainability and business interests and apply its methods and knowledge to formulate policy implication. We would like to encourage marketing researchers to take this position and voice policy concerns and recommendations based on their research for an objective and more serious sustainability transformation.

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