

# **Understanding Consumer Responses to Incongruent Brand Activism: Appraisal and Coping Processes in a Religious and Cultural Context**

By

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## Abstract

Prior research in brand activism (BA) has shown that consumers react positively or negatively to a brand's stance on controversial issues based on their value alignment. However, these studies often overlook the underlying psychological and social mechanisms that drive such responses to BA, especially in cases of incongruent brand activism (IBA). This thesis addresses this gap by drawing on the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC), conceptualising IBA as a stressor that triggers cognitive appraisal and coping processes. It examines how consumers respond to IBA that conflict with their religious and cultural values, a context largely underexplored in BA research.

The research adopts an abductively framed, sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. The qualitative phase explores how Saudi consumers interpret and respond to IBA through 22 in-depth interviews. Building on these insights, the quantitative phase comprises four experimental studies with a total of 635 participants to test the proposed model systematically. Findings show that responses to IBA are not uniformly negative but vary depending on the severity and underlying appraisals. Activism that challenges religious values or is perceived as a threat to social identity often triggers rejection, whereas appreciation of self-dignity can instead foster forgiveness, even in cases of IBA. Brand origin (domestic vs. foreign) does not shield brands from their activism, as consumers hold both to similar moral standards.

The thesis makes several contributions. Theoretically, it extends TTSC by illustrating how consumers navigate ideological dissonance in religious and culturally anchored contexts, introducing culturally grounded constructs and psychological pathways. Methodologically, it contributes to an underutilised application of sequential mixed methods in BA research. Managerially, brands are advised to avoid cultural and religious symbolic cues that trigger sacred value violations and to present their activism in ways that uphold dignity and align with consumers' cultural and religious frameworks. Overall, this thesis moves beyond the dominant binary logic of alignment versus misalignment, offering a more nuanced, culturally contextualised framework for understanding how consumers in religious societies navigate ideological conflict in the marketplace.

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## Abbreviations

BA	Brand activism
IBA	Incongruent brand activism
SIT	Social identity threat
RFVI	Religious value-incongruence
ROD	Religious obligation-driven
CBA	Consumer-brand stance alignment
nWOM	Negative word-of-mouth
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
CPA	Corporate political activity
TTSC	Transactional theory of stress and coping
PR	Public relation
CSA	Corporate sociopolitical activism
CSJ	Corporate social justice
CRM	Caused related marketing
CSM	Corporate social marketing
SPB	Social purpose branding
CBI	Consumer-brand identification

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background to The Study

In recent years, brands have faced mounting pressures to take stands on polarising controversial issues to comply with such customers' expectations and values (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Anisimova et al. 2025). This phenomenon, known as brand activism (BA), occurs when a brand takes a stance on contentious issues as a reflection of its values (Moorman 2020). BA has become an increasingly visible and influential feature of global marketing practice, either in commercial markets (e.g., Mirzaei et al. 2022) or non-commercial ones (e.g., Lee et al. 2024). No longer confined to product quality or corporate responsibility, brands are now stepping into the realm of sociopolitical engagement, often aligning themselves with contentious causes such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, climate action, and immigration reform. BA marks a departure from traditional notions of brand neutrality, positioning companies as agents of social change (Moorman 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

This evolution indicates a broader societal pressure in which consumers expect brands to take a stand on the issues that matter to them (Anisimova et al. 2025). In Edelman's (2020, 2022, 2024) reports, 86% of consumers believe that brands are expected to go beyond their business interests by addressing societal challenges, and over 70% say they are more likely to support and advocate for brands with a purpose and values. The reports also show that 78% of consumers perceive brands as inherently political, and 60% say they actively buy or boycott brands based on alignment with their values (Marszalek 2024; Ruderman 2024). These expectations reflect the growing importance of brand positioning and public engagement in shaping consumer behaviour.

However, BA has also been shown to polarise audiences (Zhou et al 2024). Studies show that when brands engage in activism, they can unintentionally alienate segments of their consumer base who disagree with the stance, particularly if the issue is perceived as ideologically charged or politically divisive (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Pomerance and Zifla

2025). Thus, BA is inherently risky because it amplifies identity-based responses and forces consumers to reconcile their personal beliefs with the brand's position (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). Indeed, the literature has shown that BA can be a double-edged sword (Cai et al. 2025). On one hand, when consumers view BA as authentic and congruent with their values, they show positive emotions, greater trust, and increased loyalty (Shetty et al. 2019; Schmidt et al. 2022; Chu et al. 2023). On the other hand, brands that are perceived as misaligned with stakeholders' values may experience significant backlash (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Zhao et al. 2024). This backlash may manifest in the form of boycotts, criticism on social media, or harm to a brand's reputation (Jungblut and Johnen 2022; Pöyry and Laaksonen 2022; Liaukonytė et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2024). As an illustration, Nike's endorsement of ex-NFL athlete Colin Kaepernick's demonstration against racial injustice drew social consumer support as well as severe reputational backlash, including the burning of Nike merchandise (Bostock 2018).

Recent research has further complicated our understanding of consumer response to BA by emphasising factors such as cause relevance (Li et al. 2022), message framing (Xie et al. 2024; Beermann and Hallmann 2025), perceived timeliness or motivation (Gerrath et al. 2025; Lécuyer et al 2025), and whether the activism is conducted by brands with large or small market share (Hydock et al. 2020). Activism on low-salience or unpopular causes may be ignored or provoke indifference (Xie et al. 2024), while poorly timed activism can be viewed as exploitative (Lécuyer et al 2025). Thus, due to its polarising nature, BA may generate such high engagement or cause such negative sentiment (Cai et al. 2025). BA is not treated equally by consumers, and the effectiveness of activism is often contingent on issue relevance, activism history, product type, context, and cultural resonance (Hydock et al. 2020; Cai et al. 2025). Inauthenticity has also emerged as a central critique of BA, especially when there is a mismatch between a brand's messaging and its historical behaviour, internal practices, or perceived sincerity (Atanga et al. 2022; Ahmad et al. 2024; Walter et al. 2024; Ginder and Johnson 2025). Activism that appears opportunistic, performative, or inconsistent with a brand's values can be punished more harshly than silence (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Authenticity is therefore seen as a key element, shaping whether consumers perceive BA as a meaningful commitment or a superficial marketing ploy.

Nevertheless, despite the increasing practice of BA, research in this area is still in its early stages. Most of the literature has discussed the positive effects of value alignment, showing

that consumers reward brands that support causes they advocate for (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Chu et al. 2023). However, such research often relies on Western, liberal samples and tends to offer a binary model: value congruence results in support, while incongruence causes a backlash (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). In societies where collective moral or religious norms supersede individual expression (e.g., Chan et al. 2024), this binary framework (support vs backlash) oversimplifies the psychological and cultural processes that shape consumer responses to BA. For instance, in 2022, Pixar's film Lightyear included a brief same-sex kiss between two female characters, a move applauded in liberal markets, but the film was subsequently banned in at least 14 Muslim-majority countries, including Saudi Arabia (The Guardian 2022). In these contexts, the depiction was considered a violation of sacred religious and cultural values. Consequently, the brand's alignment with LGBTQ+ representation triggered institutional censorship and public backlash, illustrating that value incongruence in conservative societies can provoke strong reactions beyond mere disagreement, comprising moral outrage and perceived threats to the community's sacred norms.

This results in one growing area of concern, which is the "dark side" of BA, where consumers perceive a brand's activism as ideologically or morally incongruent with their values, a phenomenon this thesis terms incongruent brand activism (IBA). According to Shepherd et al. (2015), the possibility of brands alienating consumers relies on the ideological perspective through which the brand is perceived. Hence, in these instances of IBA, perceived incongruence can lead to emotional discomfort, moral violation, betrayal, or even brand hate (Rodrigues et al. 2021; Wannow et al. 2024; Kuo and Olivia 2025).

Given that past studies have established that negative information (e.g., IBA) has more powerful effects on judgment and decision-making than positive information, especially in moral or ethical contexts (Ahluwalia et al. 2000; Baumeister et al. 2001; Kam and Deichert 2020), the academic need to study IBA's negative nature becomes even more essential. This is because brands are expected to face stronger negative responses from consumers who disagree with their activism compared to the positive reactions from those who agree (Hydock et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Jungblut and Johnen 2022). Although some brands may consider taking a stand to offer long-term reputational benefits (Vredenburg et al. 2020), failing to fully understand the negative psychological consequences

of IBA, especially among cultural or religious consumers, may result in brand alienation or erosion of trust.

Nonetheless, existing literature has paid limited attention to how value incongruence in religious and cultural norms psychologically unfolds. While studies have explored the effect of traditional norms or religious orientation on ethical consumption (e.g., Vitell 2009; AlSheddi et al. 2020), few have connected these constructs to BA. An even smaller number of studies have offered a process-oriented explanation of how consumers make sense of, manage their emotions, and act in response to IBA. This thesis, therefore, focuses on a religious and conservative setting (e.g., Saudi Arabia) where brands, especially global ones, frequently intersect with strong local values, and where value incongruence is not hypothetical but frequent. Although Section 1.3 presents the political and cultural features of the context in which this research is conducted, Western firms are a significant force in numerous consumer markets, and most of them engage in normative activism domestically while being perceived as offensive elsewhere. This kind of transcultural dissonance renders the Saudi marketplace particularly well-suited to study consumer negotiation of ideological incongruence.

Furthermore, as BA globalises (Shukla et al. 2024), its reach across cultures is not simply an academic concern but also a managerial one. Brands that operate across multiple markets must reconcile the desire for ethical coherence with the reality of diverse consumer beliefs and expectations. Failing to do so may lead to reputational risks, consumer alienation, or ethical inconsistency (Shukla et al. 2024; Wannow et al. 2024), particularly in culturally or religiously anchored societies. As such, this thesis contributes to both scholarship and practice by offering a more nuanced, theory-driven understanding of how incongruent activism affects consumer psychology and by highlighting the importance of cultural context in evaluating consumer response to sociopolitical branding.

## 1.2 Research Objective and Questions

The first objective of this thesis is to explore and explain how consumers embedded in religious and culturally distinct societies interpret and respond to BA that contradicts their shared religious and cultural norms. While BA has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, most existing studies focus on consumer support for or opposition to activist stances based on personal/political value alignment, primarily in Western contexts (e.g.,

Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Ahmad et al. 2024; Malik et al. 2025; Mohanty and Chen 2025). The Saudi context, where religious and cultural values are deeply institutionalised and strongly influence consumption, offers a unique opportunity to examine how a brand's stance misalignment with religious and cultural values impacts consumers' ability to reconcile or resist such ideological conflicts in the marketplace.

The second objective is to investigate the “dark side” of BA, focusing on instances where consumers perceive a brand's stance as opposing their religious or cultural values (i.e., IBA). While prior studies often assume that IBA naturally results in negative outcomes such as boycotts or attitudinal shifts (e.g., Bhagwat et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), evidence suggests that consumers may continue purchasing from ideologically incongruent brands (e.g., Haupt et al. 2023). This raises important questions about how consumers navigate such conflicts and suggests the existence of unexplored mediating psychological processes.

The third objective is to uncover the psychological mechanisms through which consumers cognitively appraise and cope with IBA. This objective moves beyond measuring consumer outcomes (e.g., purchase intention) to examine how such outcomes are formed. To achieve this, the thesis adopts the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) to analyse how consumers evaluate incongruent stances, the strategies they employ to manage dissonance, and how the severity of perceived incongruence shapes their cognitive and coping responses. Accordingly, I present the following research questions:

- 1. How do consumers in a religious and conservative society interpret and respond to brand activism that is incongruent with their religious and cultural values? (Qualitative focus)**
- 2. What psychological processes do consumers experience when exposed to value-incongruent brand activism, and how do these processes shape their purchase intentions? (Quantitative focus)**
  - a) What cognitive appraisals and coping strategies do consumers employ when confronting brand activism that challenges their religious or cultural values?**

### 1.3 Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, guided by post-positivist philosophy and abductive reasoning. The post-positivist perspective recognises that BA is a dynamic and context-sensitive phenomenon, requiring methodological flexibility to observe both objective patterns and subjective meanings. Hence, this stance allows for the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, aligning methodological decisions with the research problem rather than with a fixed epistemological position (Saunders et al. 2015; Rahi 2017).

Given the limited research on BA within religious and culturally traditional societies, such as Saudi Arabia, this thesis adopts an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell et al. 2018). The qualitative phase precedes the quantitative, allowing for inductive exploration of how consumers interpret and emotionally respond to BA that contradicts their sacred values. Twenty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with Saudi consumers to capture lived experiences, emotional reactions, and cultural reasoning in response to IBA. These findings informed the development of a conceptual framework and identified context-specific constructs not yet fully captured in existing BA literature.

The quantitative phase comprised a total of 635 responses by employing a series of four experimental designs to empirically test the relationships among IBA, cognitive appraisals, coping strategies, and consumer responses. The progression from a simple one-factor design to a more complex 2x2 factorial experiment allowed for a systematic investigation of the model under varying conditions of ideological incongruence and brand origin. This design facilitated examination of cognitive appraisals and coping mechanisms as mediators between IBA and behavioural outcomes, such as purchase intention.

Although some conceptual overlap exists between the two phases, each serves a distinct function: the qualitative phase (RQ1) supports conceptual discovery, while the quantitative phase (RQ2) enables empirical and theory testing. The TTSC provides the overarching theoretical lens, allowing the thesis to investigate how consumers cognitively appraise and emotionally cope with ideological dissonance. Framing IBA as a value-based stressor, TTSC enables a nuanced analysis of intra-individual variation in response formation.

The thesis is abductively framed in its rationale, striking a balance between inductive reasoning from qualitative data and deductive hypothesis testing in the quantitative phase (Clark et al. 2021). This logic of inquiry aligns with the study's dual aim: to uncover new context-driven insights and to validate them systematically within a culturally distinct environment. In doing so, the methodology supports both theoretical contributions, extending TTSC into a new empirical domain, and managerial relevance, offering a nuanced understanding of how culturally and religiously rooted consumers navigate ideological conflict in the marketplace.

## 1.4 Thesis Expected Contributions and Originality

This thesis advances the literature on BA by offering a culturally grounded and psychologically informed account of how consumers in religious and conservative societies respond to activist brand messages that conflict with their deeply held values. While prior studies in this area have predominantly focused on consumers in Western, secular, and politically liberal contexts (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Haupt et al. 2023; D'Arco et al. 2024; Pomerance and Zifla 2025), this research shifts the lens to a non-Western, sacred-value environment, specifically Saudi Arabia, where religious and cultural norms are central to consumer identity and behaviour.

Also, one of the main contributions of this thesis lies in its integration of the TTSC into the study of BA. Rather than treating consumer reactions to IBA as straightforward expressions of support or rejection (e.g., Shukla et al. 2024; Zhou et al. 2024), this thesis conceptualises IBA as a value-based stressor that elicits a cognitive and emotional coping process. By drawing on TTSC, the research introduces a processual understanding of how consumers appraise the personal and communal significance of activist messages and subsequently employ coping strategies that reflect both individual agency and collective moral commitments. This approach enables the development of a theoretically rich framework that explains not only what consumers do in response to IBA, but also how and why they arrive at those responses.

In doing so, the thesis introduces novel constructs that capture context-specific psychological dynamics. Such constructs can help explain why some consumers disengage from brands they disagree with, while others tolerate or forgive incongruent messages. These insights extend existing BA theories that often rely on political ideology or personal value alignment

(e.g., Vredenburg et al. 2020; Wannow et al. 2024; Zhao et al. 2024) by demonstrating how sacred values and communal norms produce a distinct pattern of meaning-making, emotional evaluation, and behavioural intent.

Methodologically, the thesis makes a significant contribution to the field by employing a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. The qualitative phase uncovers grounded, culturally specific appraisals and coping strategies that are not captured in existing models, while the experimental phase tests the causal pathways between perceived value incongruence, cognitive appraisals, coping strategies, and consumer responses. This design balances inductive discovery with deductive testing and represents a rare integration of qualitative and experimental methods in the BA literature, where content analysis or experiments remain the dominant approach (Pimentel et al. 2024).

Finally, the thesis addresses the geographic and cultural gaps in BA research (D'Arco et al. 2024; Pimentel et al. 2024) by focusing on a religious and conservative society that also serves as a site of global consumer engagement. In doing so, it offers timely and underrepresented insights into how brands are evaluated in contexts where religious and cultural norms strongly influence public discourse, moral boundaries, and consumption decisions. These findings have broader implications for global brand management, particularly as brands navigate increasingly pluralistic and ideologically diverse markets.

Taken together, this thesis makes four interrelated contributions that are developed and elaborated across subsequent chapters. Specifically, it contributes (1) theoretically, by extending BA research into religious and sacred-value contexts through the lens of the TTSC; (2) conceptually, by introducing culturally grounded appraisal and coping mechanisms that explain divergent consumer responses to IBA; (3) methodologically, by employing a sequential mixed-methods design that integrates qualitative insight with experimental testing; and (4) managerially, by offering actionable guidance for brands navigating activism in religious and conservative markets. These contributions are outlined at a high level in this chapter, integrated into the empirical discussion in Chapter 9, and systematically consolidated in Chapter 10.

## 1.5 Research Context: Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia represents a unique and timely context in which to observe the consumer response to BA, especially when activism is placed against prevailing traditional or religious norms (i.e., IBA). The social culture of Saudi Arabia is firmly rooted in Islamic religiosity and cultural conservatism, positioning it as one of the most religiously homogeneous societies in the world (Navarre 2024). Islam is not only the dominant faith but also the foundation of the legal system, public policy, and national identity (Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024; Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia 2025). In line with what Chatman (1989) calls a “strong culture,” Saudi Arabia exhibits high alignment and intensity in shared values, particularly in the domains of religion, gender norms, and moral behaviour (Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024; Al Omran 2025). Traditional norms violations, therefore, are likely to trigger stronger dissonance and consumer resistance compared to more pluralistic societies where multiple value systems coexist (Gelfand et al. 2006; Aldossari and Murphy 2024; Kitayama and Salvador 2024).

Additionally, Saudi Arabia operates under an absolute monarchy, with a centralised political structure that plays a significant role in shaping public discourse and business activity. In this system, public criticism of government policies or national reform agendas is highly restricted (Al-Saggaf and Weckert 2011), which affects not only citizens’ freedom of expression but also how brands must frame their public communication. As a result, activism that challenges or contradicts state-supported initiatives may be viewed not just as controversial but also as potentially politically sensitive.

Against this backdrop, the launch of Saudi Vision 2030 has initiated sweeping reforms aimed at economic diversification, modernisation, and increased social inclusion (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024). These reforms include expanding the entertainment sector, empowering women, and liberalising aspects of public life that were previously constrained by religious or cultural norms (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024). While these governmental changes signal a shift toward modernisation, they have also provoked mixed reactions across Saudi society, particularly among more conservative demographics (Hothan and Butler 2024). Hence, it heightens the moral salience of value-laden issues, such as gender roles, public entertainment, and LGBTQ+ rights (See Chapter 3 for focal issues selection).

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's marketplace is thoroughly influenced by the presence of such Western brands that operate across key sectors, such as food and beverage, fashion, entertainment, and electronics (Jobeilly 2024; Khatu 2025). These Western brands often hold values and cultural priorities of their home countries, some of which may conflict with Saudi Arabia's traditional value system. Consequently, the potential for value incongruence is foreseeable within this context, as these brands may engage in activism that is controversial or contradictory to Saudi consumers.

In addition to cultural conservatism, Saudi Arabia's demographic profile adds further relevance to the study of IBA. The population is exceptionally young, with a median age of just 29 years and nearly 84% under the age of 44 (General Authority for Statistics 2024). Research consistently shows that Millennials and Gen Z are particularly attentive to the sociopolitical stances of brands (Chatzopoulou and de Kiewiet 2021) and are more likely to make purchase decisions based on perceived value alignment (Shetty et al. 2019). Jin et al. (2023) show that younger consumers may be attracted to CEOs or brands that endorse causes consistent with their personal beliefs, leading to increased engagement and loyalty. Nonetheless, this ethical awareness can also cut both ways, as young consumers may also be quick to disengage from brands that are perceived as disrespecting their cultural or religious identity.

Hence, the intersection of cultural conservatism, religious salience, political centralisation, and young ethical consumerism makes Saudi Arabia a suitable context to study how consumers interpret and respond to IBA. The study is also opportune in the sense that it captures a time of transformation where traditional values intersect with brand discourses and state-led reform.

Moreover, to isolate the effects of religious incongruence from those of cultural variation, Vitell (2009) and Cohen and Neuberg (2019) recommend that religious consumer research either focus on a single national culture or statistically control for cross-cultural variables in multinational samples. By conducting this research in Saudi Arabia, a highly homogeneous context concerning culture, religion, and national identity, this thesis minimises the potential impact of confounding factors. It allows for a more focused examination of the psychological and behavioural processes that arise in response to IBA (Mathras et al. 2016).

It is important to note that throughout this thesis, the terms religious and conservative are treated as related but analytically distinct dimensions of the research context. Because Saudi Arabia represents a setting in which religious norms and cultural conservatism are closely intertwined, this thesis uses the term “religious and conservative” to acknowledge that consumer responses to BA may be shaped by religious doctrines, cultural traditions, or both, without assuming that conservatism is necessarily religious in nature. This distinction is important for theoretical clarity and for assessing the potential generalisability of the findings to other contexts where conservatism may be culturally or politically grounded rather than religiously driven.

In sum, Saudi Arabia is not only theoretically appropriate but also practically applicable as a research context. Its religious and culturally stable value system, evolving socio-political landscape, and youthful consumer market provide fertile ground for exploring the complex ways that IBA are interpreted, apprised, and acted upon.

## **1.6 Structure of The Thesis**

This thesis consists of a ten-chapter structure that aims to provide such a coherent and progressive investigation of the phenomenon of IBA in the Saudi Arabian context. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the research. It begins with presenting the background and significance of the research, defining the research objectives and questions, describing the research methodology, and explaining why Saudi Arabia is a relevant research context.

Chapter 2 offers a critical synthesis of literature on three key areas. These include BA and related concepts, the notion of value incongruence in consumer-brand relationships (with a focus on religious and cultural contexts), and the theoretical foundation drawn from the TTSC. Gaps in the literature are identified for positioning the study's original contribution.

Chapter 3 discusses the research paradigm under which the study was conducted. It justifies why a post-positivist epistemology and abductive reasoning are to be utilised and outlines the exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. The chapter also outlines the integration strategy used to combine qualitative and quantitative phases and gives an overview of the issue selection process utilised for the experimental manipulations.

Chapter 4 provides a clear account of qualitative methodology. It addresses the use of semi-structured interviews, sampling and recruitment, and the steps taken to secure rigour and trustworthiness in the data. The chapter further describes the process of thematic analysis used to produce the initial framework that informed the quantitative studies.

Chapter 5 accounts for the thematic results of 22 in-depth interviews with Saudi consumers. The findings are focused on three broad themes that together depict how consumers make sense of and cope with IBA. These findings constitute the conceptual foundation for the theoretical model developed in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 6 develops the qualitative findings into an empirically testable theory of consumer response to IBA. The chapter discusses three categories of cognitive appraisals (religious value incongruence (RVI), social identity threat (SIT), and self-dignity) and two coping strategies (religious obligation-driven (ROD) coping and forgiveness coping). It presents the hypotheses for every pathway, including the moderating effect of brand origin.

Chapter 7 explains the experimental method used to test the model. It provides information on the four experimental studies, pre-test manipulations, recruitment and sample plans, measuring scales, and validity and reliability tests. Chapter 8 presents the findings of the four experimental studies.

Chapter 9 brings together the findings and discusses the research questions, whereas Chapter 10 articulates the theoretical and managerial significance. The chapter concludes with observations on research limitations and directions for future research.

## **1.7 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has introduced the core foundations of the thesis by discussing the growing relevance of BA and the need to explore its effect in culturally and religiously markets. It discusses the lack of empirical attention to IBA, particularly within non-Western contexts. The research objectives and questions were presented, focusing on how Saudi consumers perceive BA that contradicts their religious and cultural norms and the psychological mechanisms they employ. The research methodology, which comprised one qualitative and four quantitative studies, was briefly presented to illustrate how the research is conducted in phases. The chapter then contextualised the study within Saudi Arabia, a unique setting

characterised by strong cultural consensus, rapid socio-economic reform, and heavy exposure to Western brands. The chapter concluded with a summary of the thesis structure, giving the reader an outline of the following chapters.

## Chapter 2

### Literature review

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an extensive literature review on BA, specifically its negative side (i.e., IBA), where a brand takes a position contrary to the values that are adopted by consumers. This literature review is the basis for examining consumers' psychological and behavioural responses, shaped by religious values and social norms, to BA contrary to their values. The chapter is structured into three broad sections. It begins with the explanation and evolution of BA, and the distinction between BA and related concepts, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate political action, and cause-related marketing (CRM). The discussion highlights the limitations of existing frameworks in considering the psychological process underlying consumer reactions to IBA, thereby facilitating the use of the TTSC in this study.

The chapter subsequently reviews the value-incongruence, religion, and brand transgressions concepts, relying on empirical evidence to elucidate how consumers feel discomfort or anger when brands behave in ways that contradict their fundamental values. The theoretical review also takes place in the context of Saudi Arabian culture and Islam, with one section providing a detailed review of the moral origins of Islamic values. Thereafter, an overview of brand transgression, both its foundation and consumers' reactions to such brand violations, is provided.

The last sections of the chapter describe coping strategies. The review elaborates on the basis of TTSC and examines the various coping strategies available to consumers, in accordance with consumer psychology and stress research. In conclusion, the review summarises coping strategies based on religious beliefs that are often used by Muslim consumers. These include Tawakkul (faith in God), Sabr (patience), and social support.

#### 2.2 Brand Activism

BA, referred to as a brand's explicit and public stance on controversial issues (Moorman 2020), has emerged as a significant phenomenon in contemporary marketing, garnering increasing attention from scholars, practitioners, and the general public. Businesses engaging

with causes such as climate change, racial justice, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights exemplify BA. This rise is partly driven by increasing consumer expectations for brands to participate in public debates and contribute to societal change (Edelman 2019). Consumers today ask for more than services or products; they want their purchases to contribute to global change. Statistics reports indicate that customers are four to six times more likely to purchase, support, and recommend purpose-driven brands, with 70% willing to back such firms (Aziz 2020; Edelman 2020).

Since a brand's communication strategies significantly influence how consumers perceive its identity (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), brands should engage in activism with caution and consistency, aligning with issues pertinent to their business (Stanley 2020). However, when brands take a stand on contentious subjects, they risk alienating some stakeholders while gaining the support of others. For example, Patagonia's environmental activism, including its "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign, encouraged consumers to reduce consumption and consider environmental impacts (Patagonia 2011). Similarly, Nike's "Dream Crazy" commercial, featuring Colin Kaepernick advocating for racial justice, caused controversy but also drew a loyal customer base to the brand's stance (Bostock 2018).

Overall, BA is a nuanced and multifaceted concept that businesses should carefully navigate. While it has the potential to create customer loyalty and direct positive change, it demands a deep understanding of the values of customers and corporations and the controversial topics being addressed (Moorman 2020). Hence, BA is a vital area in modern marketing research that requires further exploration to clarify its boundaries and influence (Radanielina Hita and Grégoire 2023). In the subsequent sections, a discussion of the conceptualisation of BA, including its definition, characteristics, and impact, is presented.

### **2.2.1 Defining Brand Activism: Evolution and Conceptual Clarifications**

Different disciplines refer to BA using overlapping but distinct terminology, including corporate sociopolitical activism (Bhagwat et al. 2020), corporate social advocacy (Dodd and Supa 2014), corporate activism (Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020), and brand political activism (Moorman 2020). These terms capture related phenomena, brands or their representatives taking a stand on contentious issues but differ in emphasis and scope (Table 1).

Public relations (PR) scholars often focus on statements rather than actions, framing activism as a reputational strategy (e.g., Dodd and Supa 2014), whereas marketing scholarship typically considers both verbal and behavioural forms of activism (e.g., Bhagwat et al. 2020). PR definitions, such as Hambrick and Wowak's (2019, P. 34) description of sociopolitical activism as a leader's personal stance on political debate, may overlook actions embedded in product design, supply chain practices, or financial contributions. Marketing definitions, by contrast, encompass these broader expressions of activism, emphasising consumer impact (e.g., integrating the LGBTQ+ flag into product design to signal values alignment).

Bhagwat et al. (2020) attempt to bridge these perspectives with their definition of corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) as “the firm’s public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue” (p. 1). However, the term “sociopolitical issue” may unintentionally narrow the scope to primarily social or political causes (Nalick et al. 2016), whereas BA can also address environmental, economic, and legal matters (Sarkar and Kotler 2018; Pomerance and Zifla 2025). Moreover, CSA often relies on communication channels such as press releases or social media rather than more resource-intensive activism, such as monetary support (Pimentel et al. 2024). Vredenburg et al. (2020) offer a more strategic definition by defining authentic BA as “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success” (p. 446). While this highlights the dual aim of social change and brand performance, it implies intentional strategic benefit, potentially overlooking instances of beyond economic interests, woke branding, or unplanned activism triggered by external events, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Mirzaei et al. 2022).

Given the evident inconsistency in BA terminology and definitions (Cammarota et al. 2023), for this thesis, Moorman's (2020) definition, “public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name” (pp. 388-389), is adopted as the foundation. Although Moorman uses the term “brand political activism,” her definition accommodates a range of activist forms and acknowledges the polarising nature of such engagement. Following Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), the term brand activism is preferred here for its inclusivity (Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Pimentel et al. 2024). Unlike terms that emphasise advocacy, representing or supporting others (Edgett 2002; Wettstein and Baur 2016), the term activism signals deliberate action (Bhagwat et al.

2020) and a commitment to social change (Klar and Kasser 2009), aligning with BA's emphasis on embodying its principles in practice (Vredenburg 2020).

Building on Moorman's (2020) definition of brand political activism as public speech or actions on partisan issues, and Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) view of BA as a values-driven, non-neutral stance, this thesis conceptualises Incongruent Brand Activism (IBA) as a specific subset of BA. IBA refers to situations when a brand publicly takes a stand on a contested sociopolitical issue that consumers perceive as misaligned with their cultural value system. This emphasis on perceived misalignment distinguishes IBA from general forms of activism that may align positively with consumer beliefs. By focusing on incongruence, the concept captures the conditions under which activism becomes a source of moral tension, negative affect, and potential consumer backlash

**Table 1:** Overview of Brand Activism Constructs and Concepts

Source: Author's own work

Term	Author(s)	Definition	Key Features	Research Approach	Examples from the literature
Brand activism	Sarkar and Kotler (2018, p. 463)	“Brand efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society.”	Focus on leveraging the brand's <u>voice</u> and <u>actions</u> to drive social change, transcending mere economic benefits.	Consumer behaviour (Conceptual)	Anisimova et al. (2025), Francioni et al. (2025), Pimentel et al. (2024), Chu et al. (2023), Bhargava and Bedi (2022), Key et al. (2021), Smith et al. (2021), Sibai et al. (2021), Vredenburg (2020), Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020).
	Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020, p. 2)	“The act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand”		Consumer behaviour (experimental)	Saracevic and Bodo (2024), Verlegh (2024).

(Authentic) Brand activism	Vredenburg (2020, p. 446)	“Purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success.”		Consumer behaviour (Conceptual)	Wannow et al. (2024), Xie et al. (2024), Bogicevic et al. (2023), Key et al. (2021).
Brand political activism	Moorman (2020, pp. 388-89)	“Public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name.”		Consumer behaviour (Conceptual)	Beermann and Hallmann (2025); Ahmad et al. (2024), Podnar and Golob (2024), Fletcher-Brown et al. (2023).
Corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA)	Bhagwat et al. (2020, p. 1)	“The firm’s public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue”		Consumer behaviour (Conceptual + event analysis)	Pomerance and Zifla (2025); D’Arco et al. (2024), Atanga and Mattila (2023), Atanga et al. (2022), Özturan and Grinstein (2022), Burbano (2021).
Corporate social advocacy	Dodd and Supa (2014, p. 5).	“An organisation making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues.”	Focuses on enhancing the company’s image through public <u>statements</u> and communications.	Public relationship (Conceptual & experimental)	Zhang and Zhou (2025), Dhanesh (2024), Rim et al. (2024), Lim and Young (2021), Parcha et al. (2020); Kim et al. (2020).
CEO’s sociopolitical activism	Hambrick and Wowak (2019, P. 34)	“A business leader’s personal and public expression of a stance on some matter of current social or political debate, with the primary aims of visibly weighing in on the issue and influencing opinions in the espoused direction”	Centred on communication with little to no direct costs and limited behavioural impact.	Organisational behaviour (Employees + Consumer behaviour) (Conceptual)	Appels (2023), Wowak et al. (2022).
CEO activism	Chatterji and Toffel (2019, P. 159)	“Corporate leaders speaking out on social and environmental policy issues not		Organisational behaviour (experimental)	Hou and Poliquin (2023), Jin et al. (2023),

		directly related to their company's core business, which distinguishes it from nonmarket strategy and traditional corporate social responsibility”			Melloni et al. (2023), Olkkonen and Morsing (2023), Brown et al. (2020).
Corporate activism	Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020, p.463),	“A company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviours of actors in its institutional environment.”	Goal-oriented towards addressing specific social issues, not necessarily seeking publicity.	Consumer behaviour (Conceptual)	Bulmer et al. (2024), McKean and King (2024), Villagra et al. (2022), Villagra et al. (2021).
Corporate political advocacy	Wettstein and Baur (2016, P. 200)	“Voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same.”	- Political focus. - Issues are not related to the core business operations. - Goes beyond the business's immediate monetary interests.	Corporate responsibility and ethics (Conceptual)	Weber et al. (2023), You et al. (2023), Hydock et al. (2020).
Woke washing (in brand activism)	Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 445)	“Brands[that have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices but yet are attempting to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice”	Focus on marketing messages without genuine practices that reflect brand values; aimed at marketing gains and public image.	Consumer behaviour (Conceptual)	Ahmad et al. (2024), Mirzaei et al. (2022).
Incongruent brand activism	This thesis	<b>When a brand publicly takes a stand on a contested sociopolitical issue that consumers perceive as misaligned with their cultural value system.</b>	- Value incongruence. - Publicly divisive. - Intentional. - Consumer alienation potential.	Consumer behaviour (Mixed method – semi-structured interviews & experimental)	NA

## 2.2.2 Brand Activism and Related Marketing Concepts

BA shares conceptual territory with several established marketing and corporate responsibility constructs, yet it is distinct in its focus, scope, and potential for polarisation. Some scholars view BA as an evolution of CSR (Kotler and Sarkar 2017), as both aim to

advance societal welfare. However, the two differ in important ways. CSR refers to an organisation's voluntary moral actions that promote the common good, beyond legal or financial obligations (Carroll 1991, 1999; McWilliams and Siegel 2001). BA, by contrast, explicitly addresses contentious and polarising issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights or abortion, while CSR initiatives (e.g., reducing carbon emissions) tend to focus on widely supported and non-polarising topics (Chernev and Blair 2015; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Cammarota et al. 2023). Hence, the primary difference lies in the nature of the issues being addressed.

This difference in issue selection produces divergent stakeholder responses. CSR is typically met with positive or at least neutral reactions when perceived as sincere (Wagner et al. 2009; Mishra and Modi 2016; Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020), whereas BA can provoke strong support or opposition depending on value alignment (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Additionally, CSR initiatives are generally embedded in long-term strategic plans, often involving significant financial commitments (Varadarajan and Menon 1988). BA, on the other hand, can arise as a deliberate long-term strategy or as an ad hoc reaction to unfolding events, without necessarily requiring financial investment (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Pasirayi et al. 2022).

Empirical research reinforces these distinctions. CSR has been shown to enhance trust, reputation, and product evaluation (Brown and Dacin 1997; Chernev and Blair 2015; Weber et al. 2023), whereas BA's outcomes are more ambiguous and polarising, ranging from reputational gains (Pimentel et al. 2024) to significant backlash (Pasirayi et al. 2022). This uncertainty is compounded by the expectation that BA be authentic, aligning internal practices with public positions to avoid accusations of "woke washing" (Vredenburg et al. 2020). For example, a brand supporting racial equality is expected to demonstrate diversity in hiring and workplace culture to reinforce the credibility of its activism. Correspondingly, CSR generally generates positive outcomes toward the firm's value (e.g., Luo and Bhattacharya 2006), but BA shows different impacts, such as negative (e.g., Pasirayi et al. 2022) or positive (e.g., Garg and Saluja 2022), thereby illustrating how BA is more uncertain and riskier than CSR (Weber et al. 2023).

BA also overlaps conceptually with corporate political activity (CPA) and corporate political advocacy. CPA refers to organisational efforts to influence government policy in ways favourable to the firm, such as lobbying or campaign contributions (Hillman et al. 2004;

Pasirayi et al. 2022). It is typically discreet, investment-oriented, and aimed at business performance improvement (Lux et al. 2011; Werner 2017), in contrast to BA, which is public-facing, broader in scope, and aimed at social change (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Corporate political advocacy, meanwhile, entails explicit public support for political positions or actors (Wettstein and Baur 2016). While related to BA, it is narrower in scope, often disconnected from the firm's core business, and usually centred on political affiliations rather than a broad range of sociopolitical issues. Table 2 shows further differences between BA and other related marketing concepts.

**Table 2:** Comparing Brand Activism and Related Marketing Concepts

Source: Author's own work

Terms	Author(s)	Definition	Key features	Distinction from BA
Corporate political activity (CPA)	Hillman et al. (2004, p. 838 )	“Corporate attempts to shape government policy in ways favourable to the firm”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Political focus.</li> <li>- Investment-oriented.</li> <li>- Typically discreet and aimed at influencing policy.</li> </ul>	CPA involves discreet political manoeuvres primarily for business gains, whereas BA is broader and publicly vocal and aimed at social change.
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	Brown and Dacin (1997, p. 68)	“The firm's status and activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Non-polarised; and generally accepted.</li> <li>- Typically generate positive outcomes or at least no negative impact.</li> <li>- Has a broader agenda towards social, environmental and ethical obligations.</li> <li>- Legally obligatory and is typically more aligned with internal commercial practice.</li> </ul>	CSR focuses on fulfilling societal obligations in a non-controversial manner and usually part of a strategic plan involving financial investment, whereas BA often involves taking a stance on divisive sociopolitical issues and requires a commitment to advocate for the causes without the obligation of financial backing.
Corporate social justice (CSJ)	Zheng (2020, para. 3)	“ A reframing of CSR that centres the focus of any initiative or program on the measurable, lived experiences of groups harmed and disadvantaged by society.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Centred on equity and addressing systemic disadvantage.</li> </ul>	CSJ is internally focused on systemic change, whereas BA is more externally focused on public

			- Deep integration into internal operations.	advocacy and stance-taking.
Corporate political advocacy	Wettstein and Baur (2016, P. 200)	“Voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same.”	- Political focus. - Often unrelated to core business. - Values- or ideology-driven.	Narrower than BA, often limited to political actors or policies, while BA addresses a wider range of sociopolitical and cultural issues.
Corporate social marketing (CSM)	Kotler and Lee (2005)	A marketing-based strategy that aims to modify the behaviour of a target audience in order to improve society and develop markets for products and services.	- Often addresses non-controversial topics (e.g., health, safety). - Aims for mutual benefit (society + business).	CSM is typically aligned with product/services marketing and societal benefits, whereas BA is more focused on advocacy and activism beyond just marketing outcomes.
Cause-related marketing (CRM)	Kotler and Lee (2005, P. 96)	“Donating a percentage of revenues to a specific cause based on product sales during an announced period of time.”	- Tied directly to sales. - Cause selection can be broad and time-bound.	Cover a wide range of issues (e.g. environmental or health) and is transactional and short-term, whereas BA is ongoing and advocacy-driven without necessarily linking activism to sales.
Social purpose branding (SPB)	Gray et al. (2024, p. 1209)	“A long-term central aim that is a predominant component of its identity, meaning structure and strategy, which leads to productive engagement with broader societal and environmental issues that transcend the brand’s profits”	- Mission-led identity. - Social/ environmental focus built into core brand purpose.	SPB is integrated into brand identity and strategy; BA can overlap but is often campaign-oriented and tied to specific contentious issues.

### 2.2.3 Consumer Responses to Brand Activism and Research Gaps

BA has increasingly drawn attention from both academics and practitioners due to its potential to influence a wide array of stakeholders, including investors, employees, and partner organisations (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Kapitan et al. 2022; Verlegh 2024). While these stakeholder effects are important, the primary focus of BA research, and the focus of this thesis, lies in consumer reactions (Cammarota et al. 2023), which are central to understanding

the success and consequences of value-driven brand actions. Consumers' alignment or misalignment with a brand's stance on contentious issues shapes their attitudes, behavioural intentions, and brand engagement (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Burbano 2021). Despite substantial work on consumer responses, much of the literature emphasises Western, politically polarised contexts, often overlooking how cultural or religious values influence appraisal and coping processes in response to BA. Furthermore, the existing research typically focuses on outcomes such as purchase intention or brand attitude, with limited exploration of the underlying psychological mechanisms that guide consumer reactions over time. This section, therefore, reviews consumer responses to BA while highlighting gaps that this thesis addresses, particularly in religious and conservative markets where value incongruence is likely to trigger distinct cognitive and coping responses.

To further contextualise these consumer-focused insights, Table 3 summarises key studies on BA, highlighting their contexts, methodologies, main findings, and, critically, the gaps that remain, particularly regarding value incongruence, cultural and religious considerations, and the psychological processes underlying consumer responses. This synthesis illustrates how existing research has predominantly examined political or ideological misalignment in Western settings, while the present thesis addresses these gaps by exploring religiously grounded value conflicts and coping mechanisms in a conservative market.

Research shows inconsistent results in customers' responses to BA (Shukla et al. 2024). According to Bhagwat et al. (2020), BA can produce favourable outcomes when it is consistent with customer values. This is supported by Dodd and Supa's (2014) finding that customers' intentions to purchase increase when there is a concurrent alignment between the brand's stance on a controversial issue and customers' values; and vice versa. Comparably, Schmidt et al. (2022) demonstrate that engagement in controversial issues can positively increase customers' emotional connection toward the brand if they agree with the brand's stand or if the brand aligns with their political ideology (D'Arco et al. 2024). While these studies highlight the benefits of value alignment, they often neglect the nuanced ways such alignment is interpreted across different cultural and religious contexts. What is perceived as "alignment" in one market may not translate in another, especially where cultural or sacred values are involved.

On the other hand, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) state that BA entails an asymmetric effect where customers' attitudes, behavioural intentions, and actual choices decrease when customers disagree with the brand's stand, while no significant impact is observed in the case of customers' agreement. Their findings are also corroborated in the context of the organisation-employees relationship, as Burbano (2021) demonstrates that taking a stand on social-political issues generates a similar asymmetric impact (i.e., significant in cases of employees' disagreement with the organisation's stance and insignificant when they agree). Accordingly, Hydock et al. (2020) show that brands taking positions on divisive subjects are more likely to lose consumers because of disagreement than to attract new ones who support their position. More similar findings are also emerging in BA research (e.g., Pöyry and Laaksonen 2022; Burbano 2021). For example, Jungblut and Johnen (2022) state that customers who disagree with a brand's stance are more prone to engage in boycotting than the brand's proponents engaging in buycotting.

An explanation for the BA asymmetric effect may also be found in the principle of valence asymmetry (Baumeister et al. 2001), which states that individuals tend to give greater weight to negative information than to positive information. This notion also resonates with the concept of negativity bias, which implies that a negative issue (e.g., IBA) has more power than a comparable positive issue (Rozin and Royzman 2001). For example, regarding customers' purchase intention, research demonstrates that unethical behaviour generates a stronger negative impact than positive ethical behaviour (Trudel and Cotte 2009). The negativity bias framework offers a useful explanation but is often applied in a generalised way. It rarely accounts for whether certain values, such as sacred or religious ones, intensify the asymmetry effect. Thus, while these concepts may explain the inconsistent and vague outcomes of BA, they also reflect the complexity of approaching BA, as customers may react more negatively than positively toward BA. Nonetheless, these findings of the importance of consumer alignment vs misalignment and the asymmetric effect of BA are based largely on Western or politically polarised contexts and may overemphasise political ideology at the expense of other moral or cultural drivers. They also underexplored whether the intensity of negative responses varies when the brand's position conflicts with deeply embedded religious beliefs rather than political opinions.

Moreover, these patterns can also be partly understood through research emphasising that individuals derive part of their self-concept from belonging to social groups, and brand

engagement can serve to express and affirm such group memberships (Tajfel 1982). In BA contexts, consumers may support or oppose a brand's stance to signal identity alignment with their ingroup while distancing themselves from outgroups (Chu et al. 2023). Similarly, consumers are often drawn to brands they perceive as an extension of themselves, since such brands help fulfil identity-building needs (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Consuming brands that resonate with their identity, therefore, reinforces their sense of self. Hence, value congruence with a brand's positioning tends to produce positive effects, whereas value incongruence often leads to negative outcomes (Tuškej et al. 2013; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Schmidt et al. 2022). This identity-based explanation is compelling but assumes a relatively stable set of group memberships. In practice, identities can be fluid (Forehand et al. 2021), and consumers may negotiate between competing identities (e.g., religious vs. professional) when responding to identity threat, such as IBA (Reed and Forehand 2016). Yet, few studies investigate these tensions (Reed et al. 2012).

However, the inconsistent outcomes of BA may be affected by a spectrum of BA strategies, such as the contribution type: monetary vs non-monetary (Atanga and Mattila 2023). The manner in which BA is conducted (e.g., statements or actions) significantly influences how customers respond (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Brands that verbally advocate a contentious topic are expected to have a different effect than those that actively support the cause (Garg and Saluja 2022). Verbal advocacy involves expressing support in written or spoken comments without financial investment, whereas action-based activism requires changes to organisational policy or allocation of resources (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Given the higher level of commitment and resources required, it is likely that action-based activism has a greater effect than verbal advocacy and is more difficult for a brand to rectify (Bhagwat et al. 2020). This is consistent with Ahmad et al.'s (2022) findings that financial commitment in controversial topics from high equity brands, for example, is expected to generate positive attitudes and brand love. Such actions can also serve as costly signals, helping consumers distinguish genuine activism from superficial marketing tactics like "woke-washing" (Villagra et al. 2021; Mirzaei et al. 2022).

Also, according to research, the source of the brand's stance announcement (e.g., its CEO versus its spokesman) may affect customers' reactions (Nalick et al. 2016; Bhagwat et al. 2020). For example, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) demonstrate that the negative impact of BA is reduced when customers perceive the source of the announcement to be distant from

the brand (e.g., the CEO's personal view vs a brand's spokesperson) because it allows customers to morally decouple the brand from the stance. This finding suggests a potential reputational “buffer” for brands, yet it has not been tested in contexts where religious or moral values are seen as inseparable from the individual expressing them. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, if a CEO publicly endorses a brand position conflicting with Islamic values, consumers may struggle to dissociate the individual from the institution, intensifying backlash rather than cushioning it.

Moreover, the attributes of the issue itself affect responses. Atanga et al. (2022) propose that the novelty and level of controversy of an issue can shape consumer attitudes. They find that consumers who disagree with a brand's stance show stronger negative attitudes when the issue is perceived as more novel, possibly because the brand appears opportunistic or inauthentic. This aligns with Gerrath et al.'s (2025) findings that timing matters; consumers prefer brands perceived as early movers in activism, as it signals greater commitment. Further, attitudes are influenced by the degree of controversy, with more contentious issues eliciting less favourable evaluations (Atanga et al. 2022). This also resonates with Zhao et al.'s (2024) findings that perceived highly controversial issues lead to more negative consumers' purchase intention and brand loyalty compared to perceived low controversial issues. These issue-related effects are critical but still tend to treat “controversy” as a universal construct. In reality, controversy is socially and culturally constructed; what is novel and contentious in one setting may be familiar and unproblematic in another.

Another important factor is also how relevant the controversial issue is to an individual. Parcha et al. (2020) find that a brand's support for a controversial issue affects attitudes depending on the issue's relevance to the person's values and goals. Following Parcha et al. (2020), Saudi customers, for example, may be more affected by controversial issues related to Islamic principles, such as LGBTQ+ rights, than by non-religious issues like climate change (You et al. 2023). This reflects broader concepts in belief-behaviour consistency research, which show that people experience discomfort when brand actions conflict with their deeply held values, leading them to seek resolution either by changing their behaviour or reinterpreting the situation (Heider 1946; Festinger 1957; Raju and Unnava 2006). While belief-behaviour consistency explains dissonance well, little is known about how consumers in collectivist, religious, and conservative societies resolve such tensions, whether through disengagement, reinterpretation, or active opposition.

Furthermore, BA may occur when a single brand engages in a contentious issue or when multiple brands collaborate. For instance, following a church shooting in 2015, Amazon removed Confederate symbol merchandise from its website; in 2014, Amazon also joined 29 other companies in submitting an “Employers’ Amicus Brief” in support of same-sex marriage (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Reactions to such efforts may vary depending on the number of brands involved (Chatterji and Toffel 2018; Bhagwat et al. 2020; Parcha and Kingsley Westerman 2020; Villagra et al. 2021). Whereas Villagra et al. (2021) argue that BA is more effective when undertaken by a single brand, others find that backlash may be reduced when brands form activist coalitions (Chatterji and Toffel 2018; Bhagwat et al. 2020).

These research outcomes highlight BA's intricacy because there is not a single factor, solution or method for approaching BA. On the one hand, BA can produce social change (Key et al. 2021) and enhance brand reputation by expressing values aligned with certain consumer segments (Stanley 2020). On the other hand, due to its polarising nature, it may cause divided reactions among its stakeholders (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Nonetheless, most BA research focuses on performance outcomes and consumer behaviours linked to economic transactions (e.g., attitudes, purchase intention, behaviour; Garg and Saluja 2022; Hydock et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020) rather than on the underlying psychological processes through which such responses are formed over time. This thesis addresses this gap by integrating cognitive appraisal and coping strategy into BA research, particularly in contexts where sacred values are at stake.

In addition, the literature tends to focus on Western, political, or ideological issues, with limited exploration of religious and sacred value-based incongruence. Where religiosity is examined, it is typically treated as a demographic moderator (e.g., Swimberghe et al. 2011) rather than as a driver of appraisal and coping processes in BA contexts. Similarly, while studies have examined cultural sensitivity and brand origin (e.g., Shukla et al. 2024), few have investigated how brand origin interacts with sacred value violations. This leaves a significant gap in understanding how consumers in conservative and religious societies process, evaluate, and respond to BA that conflicts with their deeply held values.

**Table 3:** Consumer Responses to Brand Activism and Identified Research Gaps

**Source:** Author's own work

Author	Context	Methodology	Key Variables	Main Findings	Identified Gap
Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020)	Brand activism and moral judgments in Western contexts	Experiments	Brand attitude, behavioural intentions, Actual choices.	Consumer-brand disagreement on moral foundations decreases attitudes, intentions, and behaviour, no significant positive effect for agreement. Negative effects are weaker when the source of the stance is perceived as distant from the brand, enabling moral decoupling.	Focused on moral values in general, not sacred or religious values. Conducted in Western cultural contexts, overlooking how religious value incongruence may heighten backlash or limit moral decoupling.
Bhagwat et al. (2020)	Corporate sociopolitical activism and investor reactions	Event Study	Stock market reaction, Event-stance, Stakeholder political stance, Event type.	Investors react negatively when a firm's CSA deviates from stakeholders' political values and less negatively /positively when aligned. Customer alignment is especially pivotal for investor response.	Focuses on listed U.S. firms and investor perception and does not examine contexts where religious/sacred values dominate stakeholder judgments.
Dodd and Supa (2014)	Corporate Social Advocacy	Survey Experiment	Perceived stance-brand reputation fit and Purchase intention.	Higher agreement with corporate stance increases purchase intentions; disagreement decreases them; corporate social advocacy has tangible financial implications via consumer intentions.	Agreement is operationalised via perceived fit between stance and brand reputation, rather than personal alignment with consumers' own moral or sacred values. This limits applicability to contexts where alignment is based on deeply held religious/cultural values rather than brand image familiarity.
Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022)	Consumer anti-brand actions toward a politically charged campaign.	Qualitative content analysis	Triggers (field infringement, political accusations, questioned impact); Strategies (boycotting, discrediting, trapping).	Three triggers identified; anti-brand strategies include boycotts, discrediting, and "trapping." Political anti-brand actions are distinct, non-instrumental, and shaped by social-media affordances.	Focuses on political anti-brand actions and does not examine perceived value incongruence at the level of consumers' personal or sacred values, limiting transferability to contexts where cultural value misalignment is central.

Atanga and Mattila (2023)	Corporate sociopolitical activism in hospitality	Experiments	Contribution type, Perceived impact, Perceived sincerity, Brand attitude, Purchase intention	In-kind (vs. monetary) contribution perceived as higher impact → higher sincerity → improved brand attitude and purchase intention; perceived impact is the mediator.	Examines how the type of contribution affects perceived sincerity and impact, but does not address stance agreement or value alignment. Findings are situated in hospitality donations rather than consumer appraisal of stance content, making it less applicable to moral/religious value-based responses.
Atanga et al. (2022)	Corporate sociopolitical activism - effect of perceived issue novelty and controversy on brand attitude	Experiments	Perceived issue novelty, Perceived issue controversy, Stance agreement, Perceived sincerity, Brand attitude	Novelty harms brand attitude when consumers disagree; effect attenuates under agreement. High controversy lowers brand attitude via lower perceived sincerity (mediation).	“Controversy” is treated generically and as an issue attribute; it lacks cultural/religious operationalisation of controversy.
Gerrath et al. (2025)	LGBT+ brand activism; focus on effect of activism timing (early vs late)	Field study and multiple online experiments	Activism timing, Brand effort, Financial resources, Bandwagon effect, Consumer attitudes, Purchase intention, Actual choice	Early activism leads to more favourable attitudes, higher purchase intentions, and more positive sentiment; effect mediated by perceived brand effort and moderated by financial resources/bandwagon size.	Focuses on temporal positioning of activism, not value-based incongruence or religiously grounded opposition; does not examine internal coping processes in response to activism.
Garg and Saluja (2022)	Brand activism, political ideology, and consumer emotions	Experiments	Brand activism, Issue type, Political ideology, Type of activism, Brand attitude, Willingness to pay, Positive and negative emotions, Brand-value identification	Consumer responses depend on alignment between political ideology and issue stance; happiness and pride (affective) and brand-value identification (cognitive) mediate effects; slacktivism penalised by both liberals and conservatives.	Examines ideological alignment in political terms, not sacred/religious value congruence; does not address appraisal-to-coping pathways or nuanced moral/religious obligation responses.
Ahmad et al. (2022)	Brand activism message design: type of commitment,	An exploratory text-mining study and experiments	Commitment type, Message framing, Brand equity, Perceived	Non-financial commitment generally yields higher authenticity and brand love; hope messages outperform frustration except in	Focuses on communication strategy and brand equity effects; does not explore consumer appraisal processes

	message framing, and brand equity		authenticity, Brand love	rhetorical commitment; high-equity brands benefit from financial commitment, low-equity from non-financial; authenticity mediates effects.	under value-incongruent activism, especially in religious contexts.
Shukla et al. (2024)	Global brand activism; effects of activism type, brand origin, and prior brand attitudes across cultures	Experiments	Brand activism by global brand, Consumer-brand stance alignment, Brand origin, , Self-brand connection, Behavioural intentions	Activism generally benefits global brands, especially those with negative brand origin; positive-origin brands benefit only when consumer prior attitudes align; self-brand connection mediates effects.	Examines alignment vs misalignment and does not differentiate mild vs severe misalignment or examine religiously grounded opposition; focus is on brand-level effects rather than appraisal-to-coping pathways.
Swimberghe et al. (2011)	Religiosity and consumer activism	Cross-sectional survey	Consumer religiosity, Christian conservatism, Ethical judgment, Voice complaint intentions, Third-party complaint intention, Boycott.	Religious commitment and Christian conservatism predict negative ethical judgments toward brands supporting value-incongruent causes; these judgments drive voice, third-party complaint, and boycott intentions.	Measures religiosity as commitment and conservatism, not perceived religious incongruence; does not address severity (mild vs severe) or explore nuanced coping responses; focuses on US Christian consumers, limiting cultural generalisability.
Wannow et al. (2024)	Moral emotions and consumer-brand identification (CBI) in brand activism	Experiments	Consumer-brand agreement, Moral emotions, CBI, Brand attitude, Issue advocacy.	Moral emotions mediate consumer-brand agreement toward brand attitude; high CBI buffers negative reactions; activism can backfire by motivating opponents to advocate contrary views.	Focuses on stance agreement rather than severity of incongruence; does not incorporate religious or sacred value conflict; examines emotional mediation but not appraisal-to-coping processes under moral/religious objection.
Vredenburg et al. (2020)	Brand activism authenticity and congruence in sociopolitical stances.	Conceptual paper	NA	Proposes a typology distinguishing authentic vs inauthentic BA; argues moderate/optimal incongruence may strengthen outcomes; authentic activism boosts brand equity and social change potential.	Discusses the incongruence conceptually but focuses on optimal/moderate incongruence rather than severity (mild vs severe); lacks empirical testing on value-based opposition or

					moral/religious objection contexts.
Zhao et al. (2024)	Consumer-brand values deviation and downstream effects	Experiments	Values deviation, Cause controversy, Consumption goal, CBI, Purchase intention, Brand loyalty.	Values deviation harms purchase intention and loyalty via reduced brand identification; effects are amplified for highly controversial causes and hedonic goals.	Examines controversy across issues; does not test within-issue severity. This thesis keeps the issue constant and manipulates severity via cultural/religious value violation. It also focuses on general values deviation rather than sacred-value opposition.
Mirzaei et al. (2022)	Woke brand activism authenticity and consumer perceptions	Content analysis	Six authenticity dimensions: Social context independency, Inclusion, Sacrifice, Practice, Fit, Motivation.	Proposes a woke activism authenticity framework; authenticity reduces perceptions of virtue signalling; inauthentic activism (low fit, no practice, profit-seeking) risks backlash	Identifies authenticity drivers but not the role of incongruence severity; does not also explore how religious/cultural objections interact with authenticity perceptions; focuses on woke activism, limiting scope to certain sociopolitical issues.
<b>This thesis</b>	<b>Value-incongruence in religious and conservative market.</b>	<b>Mixed-method (qualitative interviews + experiments)</b>	<b>IBA, Cognitive appraisal, Coping strategies, Brand origin, Purchase intention.</b>	<b>Examines how sacred value violations in BA trigger specific cognitive appraisals and coping strategies, with a focus on consumers in a religious and conservative context.</b>	<b>Bridges the gap by examining value incongruence within religious and cultural frameworks; providing a process-level explanation through TTSC to articulate how and why consumers respond to IBA in certain ways; introducing IBA severity as the main driver of consumer responses.</b>

## 2.2.4 Brand Activism in The Context of Saudi Arabia

Since the announcement of the 2030 Vision, Saudi Arabia has encountered many social changes. The government's attempts to modernise in Saudi Arabia, where cultural and religious values are deeply entrenched, generate a fertile environment for BA. This conservative nature of Saudi customers presents unique challenges and opportunities for

brands engaging in controversial issues. Saudi consumers, under the influence of strong religious and cultural habits, may react in different ways to BA compared to liberal market consumers, such as Western consumers. For instance, gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights matters are more likely to elicit responses differently due to the insistence on different religious and cultural norms.

Studies indicate that, considering the moral foundation theory, customers' reactions to political activism vary according to their political ideology (i.e., liberal vs conservative) (Fernandes 2020; D'Arco et al. 2024; Pomerance and Zifla 2025). Liberals, in contrast to conservatives, are more inclined to engage in boycotts or buycotts due to their sympathy for individual rights and welfare. Their focus on safeguarding individuals from "harm" and securing "fairness" and justice is referred to as "individualising moral values" (Graham et al. 2009). On the other hand, conservatives prioritise group cohesion, social order, and collective responsibilities or the "binding moral values," reflecting the values of "authority," "loyalty," and "purity" (Graham et al. 2009).

Thus, customers may respond differently to BA based on the moral value associated with the issue and how relevant it is to them. For instance, brands that focus on topics opposing LGBTQ+ rights or same-sex marriage emphasise defending the in-group loyalty and purity, whereas brands that support equality, such as hiring immigrants, place more weight on values related to care and fairness (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). In other words, Saudis, as classified as religious and conservative, are expected to react strongly to issues that touch their in-group identity and social values (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights) compared to issues that promote justice (e.g., racism). A significant example of a large-scale consumer macro-boycott in Saudi Arabia reflecting the sense of group and religious value loyalty occurred in response to the publication of 12 cartoons that depicted the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in a manner perceived as deeply offensive by the global Muslim community (Riefler and Diamantopoulos 2007; Al-Hyari et al. 2012).

Lacking direct access to the newspaper responsible for the cartoons and reacting to the Danish government's defence of the newspaper's freedom of speech, protesters across the Muslim world, particularly in Saudi Arabia, identified alternative boycott targets. Klein et al. (1998) suggest that when consumers harbour enmity towards a country due to religiously offensive actions, they may choose to boycott brands associated with that nation as a form of protest. In this instance, Saudi consumers initiated a boycott of Danish products, with the

dairy giant Arla Foods bearing the brunt of this backlash (Arla Foods 2006). Despite having operated in Saudi Arabia for over four decades, Arla Foods lost approximately 60% of its market share in the country within the first five days of the boycott (Abosag 2012).

Moreover, the negative impact of religious customers' outrage has often been argued to be more enduring and with a greater long-term effect on brand image compared to other types of boycotts (Swimberghe et al. 2011; Abosag and Farah 2014). Indeed, Abosag and Farah (2014) found that, even five years after the first Danish product boycott protest had taken place, there were still a significant number of Saudi consumers who continued the boycott. Further, although it had been several years since the boycott, Arla Foods still had not overcome the losses (Abosag 2012).

The above examples point out that whenever the core religious values or cultural norms are breached among religious consumers, such as Saudis, the backlash generated can be severe and long-lasting due to the fact that it strikes at the root of their identity (Al-Hyari et al. 2012). Consequently, brands involved in controversial issues should then carefully assess the religious commitment of their customers, particularly where religious values are more entrenched (e.g., Saudi Arabia), before adopting stances that are potentially in breach of such values.

### **2.3 Value-Incongruence, Religion, and Brand Transgressions**

This section explores the concept of value-incongruence and its implications for BA, the role of religion in consumer behaviour, and brand transgression. It begins by introducing the theoretical foundation of value-incongruence, emphasising the importance of value alignment between consumers and brands, particularly in conservative societies, where traditional norms and religious values are deeply embedded. This is followed by an illustration of religion impact and an introduction to Islamic values, and how they are connected with morality, to clarify the origins of Saudis and Islamic values. It then presents the concept of sacred values and discusses transgressions committed by brands, where there is a difference between performance and value transgressions, and how such transgressions may result in adverse consumer responses.

### 2.3.1 Value-Incongruence and Consumer Responses

Various studies in consumer behaviour emphasise the importance of alignment of values, norms, and identities between brands and customers, often referred to as value-congruence (You et al. 2023). Value-congruence has therefore been conceptualised as subjective congruence in which individuals evaluate the degree of congruence between their values and the perceived values of brands (Ostroff et al. 2005). This congruence is important in fostering strong consumer-brand relationships (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; You et al. 2023), as consumers tend to prefer brands that reflect their own beliefs and values, as this alignment strengthens identification and attachment (Sirgy 1982; Judge and Cable 1997; Lievens and Highhouse 2003; Lam et al. 2013; Tuškej et al. 2013; He et al. 2018). For instance, consumers are more likely to demonstrate supporting behaviours such as boycott (Neureiter and Bhattacharya 2021) when their stands on controversial issues match the positioning of a brand, as this value congruence enhances pride and identification with the brand (Hambrick and Wowak 2021). Hence, in societies where religious values and cultural norms are at the heart of collective and individual identity, congruence between a brand's values and these values and norms is crucial (Floren et al. 2020). Brands that resonate with these values not only enhance CBI but also strengthen loyalty, brand's attractiveness, and positive perceptions (Kuenzel and Halliday 2010; Jin et al. 2023).

However, when this congruence is breached, especially in environments where cultural values and religious beliefs are deeply rooted in society, the outcome is value incongruence. Thus, for the purpose of this study, value-incongruence is defined as the perceived misalignment between the norms, values, or behaviour of a brand and its customers. When a brand's actions or positions conflict with consumers' values, negative responses often follow (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Zhao et al. 2024). Such misalignment can threaten consumers' sense of identity and prompt behaviours including brand avoidance, consumer hate, or active opposition (Lee et al. 2009; Woodside et al. 2023; Davvetas et al. 2024). Studies explain that consumers experience tension when a brand deviates from expected values, leading to cognitive and emotional responses that motivate reassessment of the consumer-brand relationship (Burgoon and Hill 1988; Burgoon and Le Poire 1993; Liu et al. 2018). When conflicting cognitions arise, such as consuming a brand that contradicts consumers' religious beliefs, psychological discomfort may occur, prompting consumers to distance themselves or adjust perceptions to restore consistency (Festinger 1957; Ahn et al. 2016).

Therefore, in highly religious and conservative societies, these effects are particularly pronounced. Brands that engage in sociopolitical activism conflicting with Islamic values, for example, supporting LGBTQ+ rights or challenging gender norms, may be perceived as violating sacred and cultural values. Such transgressions can trigger adverse consumer responses, such as brand hate (Aziz and Rahman 2022), due to the centrality of religious and cultural norms in guiding ethical judgment and behavioural expectations.

To meaningfully examine value-incongruence in the context of BA in a religious and conservative society, it is, therefore, critical to understand the underlying value system that shapes consumer judgment. Since the focus of the current study is Muslim consumers, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Islamic values provide the primary moral framework within which sociopolitical stances are evaluated. These values define boundaries of congruent brand behaviour and shape consumers' interpretations of brand transgressions, ultimately influencing the type and intensity of their responses to ideologically misaligned BA. Hence, the following sections present the role of religion in consumer behaviour and provide an introduction to Islamic moral foundations to place in context how such values impact Muslim consumers' interpretation of IBA.

### **2.3.2 The Role of Religion in Shaping Consumer Value Judgments**

Understanding value incongruence in the context of ideologically sensitive BA requires an understanding of how consumers construct value judgments, such as moral ones (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), and that religion is indeed a foundational force in that process (Minton and Kahle 2014). As a socially transmitted system of beliefs, practices, and norms, religion plays a central role in shaping consumer values and delineating what is considered ethically appropriate (Vitell 2009; Saroglou and Cohen 2011). In many societies, particularly those that are religious or conservative, religious values are treated not as personal preferences but as sacred, non-negotiable principles (Tetlock 2003). These sacred values serve as a powerful filter through which consumers interpret marketplace behaviours, especially in response to brand actions that appear to challenge or violate religious norms (Fam et al. 2004).

Religion is more than just a component of culture; it is also a source of moral identity, decision-making frameworks, and social belonging (Delener 1994; Saroglou and Cohen 2011). From this perspective, consumer decision-making is not purely instrumental or

hedonic; rather, it often reflects a more complex and broader moral reasoning process (Wang and Kim 2020). Religious consumers are more likely to view brand actions through the lens of theological commitments, where consumption choices are evaluated not only for their utility but also for their moral and spiritual appropriateness (Essoo and Dibb 2004; Hyodo and Bolton 2021).

Empirical research has documented several pathways through which religiosity shapes consumer judgments. For instance, highly religious individuals are more likely to have well-defined deontological norms and are more sensitive to ethical violations in commercial contexts (Vitell 2009). Religion influences not only the recognition of an ethical problem but also the judgment, intention, and behavioural response that follows (Vitell 2009; Swimberghe et al. 2011). This moral framing means that perceived brand transgressions, especially those that challenge sacred values, are likely to evoke strong emotional reactions, including anger, betrayal, or a sense of moral outrage (Karaosmanoglu et al. 2018; Kaur et al. 2024).

Moreover, religion provides both cognitive and emotional frameworks for interpreting and responding to challenging situations (Delener 1994; Essoo and Dibb 2004). Through mechanisms such as religious attribution, individuals may understand brand-related controversies in light of divine will, moral testing, or communal responsibility (Swimberghe et al. 2011; Al-Hyari et al. 2012; Achour et al. 2016). Religion also offers coping resources, such as prayer, spiritual support, and moral guidance, which influence how consumers react to perceived value violations (Pargament 2001; Bentzen 2021). In some cases, these reactions may include active boycotts, public condemnation, or moral advocacy driven by a sense of religious obligation (Pargament 2001; Fam et al. 2004; Alserhan 2010).

Religion not only shapes how consumers judge the morality of brands but also interacts with broader cultural and psychological dynamics (Eberle 2002). For example, devout consumers often adopt more conservative, traditional, and risk-averse decision styles, preferring brands that align with their spiritual worldview (Eberle 2002; Waymer and VanSlette 2021). However, in some cases, religiosity may contribute to moral licensing, where individuals perceive themselves to be inherently moral and thus permit themselves to overlook certain brand misbehaviours, especially when other personal values (e.g., affordability or status) are prioritised (Cabano and Minton 2025).

Additionally, religion frequently overlaps with national or ethnic identities, reinforcing its role in defining group boundaries and collective moral standards (Saroglou and Cohen 2011). In Saudi Arabia, for instance, Islamic values are not only religious principles but also embedded in social, legal, and cultural institutions (Alserhan 2010; Tlaiss 2015). Consequently, any perceived misalignment between brand behaviour and Islamic teachings is likely to be experienced not just as a personal or religious challenge, but as a violation of the collective moral order. Consumers may thus hold brands to a higher standard of moral accountability (Kaur et al. 2024).

In sum, religion exerts a multi-level influence on how consumers perceive, appraise, and respond to value incongruence in brand messaging. It shapes not only the content of consumer values but also the processes through which value conflicts are evaluated and resolved. Before turning specifically to the next section of Islamic values, it is essential to first understand religion's broader role as a source of moral authority, cultural meaning, and consumer decision-making in contexts where sacred values are deeply integrated into everyday life.

### 2.3.2.1 Islam: The Religion

Islam is the second-largest and one of the fastest-growing religions in the world, with approximately 1.9 billion followers, representing nearly one-fifth of the global population (Tlaiss 2015; WorldAtlas 2022). The term “Islam” derives from the Arabic root s-l-m, meaning “to surrender,” and in its religious sense refers to the voluntary submission to the will and law of God (Allah) as revealed in the Qur'an (Fam et al. 2004). Muslims adhere to the teachings of Islam not only as a spiritual faith but also as a comprehensive way of life that governs all aspects of existence, spiritual, social, political, and economic (Fam et al. 2004).

The foundational obligations of Islam are encapsulated in the Five Pillars: the declaration of faith (shahada), ritual prayer (salat), almsgiving (zakat), fasting during the month of Ramadan (sawm), and pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) (Tlaiss 2015). These pillars outline the minimum religious obligations, yet Islamic teaching extends far beyond them, permeating ethical, commercial, and social domains (Tlaiss 2015). The two primary sources of guidance are the Qur'an, regarded by Muslims as the verbatim word of God, and the Sunnah, the sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (Basit 2012). The

Prophet is revered as the moral exemplar who embodied Qur'anic teachings in his life, serving as a model for ethical conduct (Beekun 2012).

Islamic law (sharia), derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, prescribes moral and behavioural codes that guide every aspect of life. These include principles of truthfulness, justice, honesty, respect for parents, sexual ethics, and prohibitions against harmful activities such as gambling, alcohol consumption, and dishonesty in trade (Fam et al. 2004). Importantly, Islam recognises no division between the spiritual and temporal realms; rather, all human endeavours, including economic and commercial activities, are acts of worship (ibadah) when conducted in accordance with divine commands (Saeed et al. 2001). In the following section, an explanation of the Islamic ethical framework is provided to elucidate how Muslim consumers construct their moral and value judgment decisions.

### 2.3.2.2 Introduction to Islamic Values

The inseparable connection between religion and morality in Islam is highlighted in numerous Qur'anic verses, which often mention "those who believe" and "those who do good deeds" together (e.g., Sura 2, v. 25; Sura 95, v. 6). This association suggests that in Islam, faith and moral conduct are inherently linked, where moral behaviour is both a manifestation of faith and a necessary condition for its authenticity (Khan 1987; Ashraf 1988; Minton and Kahle 2014). Consequently, it is unsurprising that for many Muslims, there is no distinction between moral and religious obligations. The latter encompasses a comprehensive framework that includes both one's responsibilities toward God and toward fellow human beings (Halstead 2007). In other words, being religious implies ethical commitment (Hassan 2007; Minton and Kahle 2014). Hence, one's moral behaviour may be guided by both moral and religious teachings, but the moral behaviour itself is coached in a religious language as it reflects the eternal truth revealed by God (Halstead 2007). These religious teachings, therefore, are directly derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Tlaiss 2015).

Unlike the evolving ethical framework of Western cultures and their tendency to utilise dichotomous categorisations, such as "right" and "wrong" or "good" and "bad" (Mackie 1990), Islamic moral frameworks are firmly rooted in religious doctrine and are less susceptible to change (Halstead 2007; Minton and Kahle 2014). Western moral frameworks are then frequently influenced by societal changes, leading to the redefinition of what is perceived as acceptable or unacceptable behaviour over time (Killen and Dahl 2021). Such

flexibility of morals allows for the possibility of aligning previously controversial issues with contemporary values, as seen in the increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage. Nalick et al. (2016) also argue that some brands involve themselves in sociopolitical issues in line with the belief that stakeholders' attitudes will eventually change to become congruent with the position of the brand.

However, Islamic moral principles are grounded in a timeless and divine order, offering a clearer, fixed and unchanging moral framework (Hussain 2007; Minton and Kahle 2014). Also, the principle of "Hisba" or "Enjoining good and forbidding wrong" (amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi an al-munkar) plays a crucial role in helping Muslims preserve their religious and moral values from deterioration over time (Pieri et al. 2014). This is a fundamental principle that motivates Muslims to promote virtuous behaviour and discourage wrongdoing. This concept can be seen in everyday situations where Muslims are motivated to uphold their values. For example, a Muslim witnessing a friend engaging in dishonest behaviour, such as lying or cheating, might feel compelled to advise the friend to stop and act truthfully. By doing so, they are following the principle of "forbidding wrong" by discouraging immoral conduct while also "enjoining good" by encouraging honesty and integrity. This process not only helps preserve the individual's ethical standards but also reinforces the importance of moral behaviour within the community (Pieri et al. 2014).

Moreover, in Islam, the moral framework is not merely a product of societal consensus but is derived from religious teachings that delineate clear categories of behaviour (Halstead 2007; Tlaiss 2015). These behaviours, known as Sharia rulings or Ahkam, are categorised into Fard (mandatory actions), Halal (permissible actions), and Haram (forbidden actions), each with subcategories that further specify the moral weight of particular behaviours (Beyanoun 1970). This structure provides a comprehensive and enduring moral system that resists the shifts in societal attitudes that might influence Western moral perspectives. For instance, while it is permissible for women to engage in sports, if the activity takes place in public, they are required to wear modest attire in accordance with Islamic values (Fam et al. 2004). Therefore, certain sports, such as swimming, are initially 'halal', but if they necessitate immodest clothing that contradicts Islamic principles, they become 'haram'. Hence, understanding this distinction is crucial when examining the potential for alignment or misalignment between Islamic values and the stances taken by brands on sociopolitical issues.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there is also a place for rational thinking in Islamic morality despite its dependency on religion. The rational thinking is particularly reflected in the application of Qiyas (analogy), which plays a significant role in shaping moral judgments and societal norms within Islamic communities (Halstead 2007). Qiyas is the rational method of applying the principles of the Qur'an and Sunnah to contemporary problems not explicitly stated in these source books (Zuhayli 2006, p. 238). For instance, while the Qur'an directly prohibits the consumption of wine, Islamic jurists have used Qiyas to extend this prohibition to all forms of alcohol on the premise that the effect of intoxication, which may disrupt the moral and social texture, is what is being prohibited.

This method of reasoning also informs debates on modern issues such as men and women working in mixed-sex offices or women playing sports in the public arena. Qiyas is also used here to interpret traditional Islamic teachings into novel conditions of society. For example, the prohibition of free interaction between women and men without a substantial context has led some to consider mixed-sex workplaces as haram (prohibited) in their argument that such environments would urge moral infractions through allowing casual and potentially inappropriate interactions. Similarly, the principle of modesty, a religious duty for both men and women, is used to justify the restriction of women practising sports in public, as such activities might be seen to breach the expectations of modest behaviour (Fam et al. 2004).

From this, it can be inferred that actions contradicting Islamic values are categorised as haram, such as the prohibition of alcohol consumption. Put differently, BA that challenges Islamic values (e.g., support for LGBTQ+, music festivals, or wearing immodest clothes) is likely to be perceived by Muslim consumers as haram. Hence, this research, which examines acts, like IBA, that may conflict with Islamic values, inherently falls within the haram category. For instance, if Saudi consumers' values agree with a brand's stance, it means there is an alignment between their Islamic values and the brand's position, categorising it as Halal. However, since this study emphasises value-incongruence, the focus will be related to the haram category when investigating BA.

Finally, such integration of faith and daily life creates a moral framework in which certain ethical values are perceived as universal, immutable, and non-negotiable, regardless of changing cultural or market norms (Beekun and Badawi 2005). In this sense, the Islamic worldview naturally aligns with the concept of sacred values, whereby both religious

obligations and cultural traditions can be elevated beyond instrumental or utilitarian considerations, a theme that will be explored further in the following section.

### **2.3.3 The Concept of Sacred Values in Religion and Consumer Behaviour**

Sacred values are those moral commitments that a community regards as possessing transcendent significance, rendering them non-negotiable and resistant to trade-offs with material or utilitarian considerations (Tetlock 2003). They are not merely strong preferences; rather, they are protected principles that evoke moral outrage when violated and are often shielded from cost-benefit calculations (Ginges and Atran 2013). While sacred values and moral outrage are closely linked in the literature, they are conceptually distinct. Sacred values refer to the underlying moral commitments that individuals treat as absolute and non-negotiable, grounded in religious or cultural meaning systems (Tetlock 2003). In contrast, moral outrage is the emotional reaction that arises when those sacred values are perceived to be violated (Ginges and Atran 2013). Thus, sacred values operate as the cognitive and moral schema that define what is considered inviolable, whereas moral outrage is the affective consequence triggered by perceived transgressions of these inviolable norms. Put differently, sacred values constitute the source of moral commitments, while moral outrage represents the response to their violation.

While the term “sacred value” is often associated with religious belief, it also encompasses deeply held cultural norms (Tetlock 2003), values that, though secular in origin, are imbued with symbolic and moral meaning within a community (Sheikh et al. 2012). From a sociological perspective, Durkheim (2016) argued that sacredness arises when certain objects, values, or practices are set apart from the profane and invested with emotional and moral significance through ritual and collective meaning-making. Religious rituals can imbue otherwise mundane phenomena, such as water, clothing, or social customs, with sacred status, thereby transforming them into non-negotiable moral imperatives (Alcorta and Sosis 2005). Hence, this process is not limited to religious contexts; cultural traditions, national symbols, and honour codes can also become sacred when they embody a group’s identity and moral order (Tetlock 2003).

Moreover, the sacred value protection model (Tetlock et al. 2000; Tetlock 2003) suggests that when sacred values are perceived to be under secular assault, such as through political decisions, market actions, or brand messaging, individuals experience moral outrage and

engage in protective behaviours to reaffirm solidarity with the moral community. These reactions are not solely cognitive but also emotional and behavioural, encompassing condemnation of violators, public signalling of loyalty, and support for punitive measures (Tetlock 2003; Ginges and Atran 2013; Sheikh et al. 2013). Attempts to induce compromise through material incentives often backfire, as such offers are seen as morally contaminating (Ginges and Atran 2013; Sheikh et al. 2013).

Importantly, sacred values can emerge and intensify through two interconnected processes, participation in ritual and perception of group threat (Sheikh et al. 2012). Regular engagement in religious or cultural rituals strengthens commitment to shared norms, while perceived threats, whether to religious beliefs, cultural heritage, or group identity, can transform even previously secular preferences into sacred commitments (Sheikh et al. 2012). Thus, in societies where religion is deeply intertwined with culture, such as Saudi Arabia, many cultural norms derive their sacred status from religious doctrine (e.g., clothing modesty), while others are elevated to sacredness through historical, tribal, or national significance (e.g., traditional gender roles; Aldossari and Calvard 2022). This is important because it suggests that in a society where religious ritual is widespread and Western cultural influence is sometimes construed as a threat, consumers may be especially likely to interpret IBA as violating sacred, inviolable commitments (Pauls et al. 2022).

In consumer behaviour, sacred values are particularly relevant in contexts of value incongruence, where brand actions or messages conflict with religious or cultural principles regarded as sacred. In such cases, responses are shaped less by pragmatic cost-benefit analysis and more by moral appraisal (Ginges and Atran 2013), leading to strong resistance, such as calls for boycott or activism against the offending brand. Pauls et al. (2022) show that when people believe a “moral line” has been crossed, they engage in moral cleansing, moral outrage, and even collective forms of action to reaffirm the violated value. These reactions emerge because sacred values are tied to individuals’ sense of who they are and what they stand for, making violations deeply identity-relevant rather than merely evaluative. Understanding sacred values in both religious and cultural terms is thus critical for explaining consumer backlash in contexts where identity and morality are intertwined with consumption choices.

Therefore, although this thesis does not adopt sacred values theory as a formal theoretical framework, insights from the sacred values literature help explain why religious and cultural principles in Saudi Arabia function as non-negotiable commitments in consumer judgment. This conceptual grounding strengthens the argument that religiously framed value incongruence, rather than secular moral disagreement, is a particularly powerful stressor in the Saudi context.

To further explore the potential impact of IBA on customer responses, a glance at the literature on brand transgression is taken. It begins by establishing the foundational concepts and their implications for the consumer-brand relationship, followed by a discussion on customer reactions to brand transgressions.

#### **2.3.4 Brand Transgression: Definition and Foundation**

Brand transgression (BT) is a broad concept that refers to a brand's violation of consumer expectations regarding appropriate behaviour, which can significantly harm the consumer-brand relationship (Aaker et al. 2004). Defined as an "act of violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding consumer-brand relationship performance and evaluation" (Aaker et al. 2004, p. 2). BT can jeopardise the brand's ability to deliver the expected benefits to its customers (Dutta and Pullig 2011), which may negatively affect its sales and market share (Ahluwalia et al. 2000), or the brand's overall perception (Dawar and Lei 2009). The concept of BT encompasses a wide range of negative events, from product-harm crises to service failures (Khamitov et al. 2020). Due to its broad applicability, BT can serve as a framework through which we can understand the potential consequences of BA, particularly when there is a misalignment between a brand's stance and the values of its consumers (i.e., IBA).

However, although both BT and IBA can result in negative consumer perceptions, there are important differences between them (Table 4). BT is usually marked by a brand's unintentional or unwanted actions (Khamitov et al. 2020), while IBA involves a brand's conscious and public support of specific values, frequently aiming to effect social change (Sarkar and Kotler 2018; Vredenburg 2020). This distinction is significant since it may influence the expectations of consumer, which then affects their responses. In particular, the cases of BT may cause consumers to often anticipate an apology from the brand (Roschk and Kaiser 2013), which can play a crucial role in fostering forgiveness (Wei et al. 2020). Conversely, in instances of IBA, consumers are less likely to expect the brand to retract its

position due to its perceived commitment to promoting a change, potentially reducing their willingness to forgive.

Moreover, BT can be categorised into two primary types: performance transgressions and value transgressions. Performance transgressions encompass failure to deliver functional promises, for example, defective product or service (Roehm and Brady 2007; Fetscherin and Sampedro 2019). On the other hand, value transgressions occur when a company engages in social or ethical misconduct, hence failing to meet customers' expectations for symbolic and psychological value (Dutta and Pullig 2011). Research suggests that value transgressions tend to elicit stronger negative reactions than performance transgressions, as they often imply intentional wrongdoing or immorality (Kähr et al. 2016; Kübler et al. 2020). Performance transgressions, though significant, are normally issues of competence (Cleeren et al. 2017) and can frequently be avoided with effective crisis management, such as product recall (Dutta and Pullig 2011).

While performance transgressions can emerge from operational errors or external crises, value-based transgressions tend to provoke stronger and more enduring consumer backlash because they threaten the moral foundations of the consumer-brand relationship (Kübler et al. 2020). These dynamics of value-based transgressions are highly relevant for understanding IBA, where the perceived conflict is often rooted in value incongruence rather than functional failure, suggesting that established insights from BT research can inform, but not wholly determine, our understanding of IBA reactions. Hence, given these conceptual overlaps, the extensive empirical base on BT, particularly in the domain of value transgressions, offers a robust framework for anticipating consumer responses to IBA. The following section, therefore, draws on established BT research to identify potential emotional, behavioural, and contextual factors that may also shape reactions to IBA, while noting where IBA's intentional and value-driven nature may require theoretical and practical adjustments.

In addition, to clarify the conceptual boundaries and intersections between IBA and other value-related consumer constructs, Table 4 provides a comparative overview of IBA alongside BT, value incongruence, brand hate, and moral violation. The table highlights both areas of conceptual overlap and the critical distinctions that separate these phenomena, underscoring the unique intentional, ideological, and value-driven nature of IBA. This comparative positioning helps situate IBA within the broader literature while demonstrating

why it cannot be collapsed into general value incongruence, moral violation, or standard brand transgression.

**Table 4:** Conceptual Distinctions Between IBA and Related Constructs

**Source:** Author's own work

Dimension	Incongruent Brand Activism (IBA)	Brand Transgression (BT)	General Value Incongruence	Brand Hate	Moral Violation
<b>Definition</b>	When a brand publicly takes a stand on a contested sociopolitical issue that consumers perceive as misaligned with their value system.	“An act of violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding consumer-brand relationship performance and evaluation” (Aaker et al., 2004, p. 2).	The perceived misalignment between the norms, values, or behaviour of a brand and its customers (Ostroff et al. 2005).	“A psychological state, whereby a consumer forms intense negative emotions and detachment toward brands that perform poorly and give consumers bad and painful experiences on both individual and social levels.” Aziz and Rahman (2022)	“An act directly at odds with a person’s moralised conviction that disrupts the perceived non-negotiable truth behind the conviction” (Pauls, p. 106)
<b>Primary Focus</b>	Brand public stances on sociopolitical issues and consumer value-based reactions.	Violations of expected brand behaviour (functional, relational, or ethical).	Broad value mismatch across domains (ethical, functional, political, religious, etc.).	Strong negative emotions and distancing responses.	Breach of moralised, non-negotiable convictions.
<b>Similarity to IBA</b>	—	Both involve perceived violation and threaten the consumer-brand relationship.	IBA is a specific form of value incongruence centred on activist public sociopolitical stances.	Both may be triggered by moral or ideological conflict.	Some IBA stances (e.g., LGBTQ+, gender norms) can be interpreted as moral violations.
<b>Key Difference from IBA</b>	—	Transgression often involves unintentional or unwanted behavioural misconduct (e.g., cheating, safety failures), while IBA is often intentional and is about ideological positioning related to sociopolitical issues, even without wrongdoing.	General value incongruence can arise from brand identity, design, tone, or practices, but not necessarily activism or public political positions.	Brand hate is a consumer outcome, while IBA is a brand action. IBA may lead to hate, but hate can also arise from non-activism issues.	Moral violation requires moral harm, whereas IBA merely requires value mismatch. Not all IBA is moralised; some stances are interpreted politically or culturally rather than morally.

#### 2.3.4.1. Customers' Responses: Insights from Brand Transgression Research

Although the literature on IBA is still emerging, research on BT offers a well-established foundation for understanding consumer reactions to value-based violations (e.g., McCullough et al. 2003; Tsarenko and Tojib 2015; Khamitov et al. 2020; Davvetas et al. 2024). Both phenomena involve a perceived breach of moral, cultural, or social expectations, but while BT often stems from product failures, ethical lapses, or corporate misconduct, IBA represents a deliberate public stance on sociopolitical issues that may clash with consumers' ideology and deeply held values (Moorman 2020). This overlap means that insights from BT studies, especially those on value-transgression, can inform IBA research, even though the two differ in intentions, causes, and even recovery dynamics.

Research in consumer behaviour emphasises that value alignment between brands and customers enhances identification with the brand (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). When brands commit value transgressions, this alignment is broken, leading to value-incongruence that can evoke strong negative emotions such as anger (Antonetti and Maklan 2016) and prompt punitive behaviours like boycotts (Braunsberger and Buckler 2011) or negative word-of-mouth (Lindenmeier et al. 2012). Ultimately, brand value transgressions undermine brand identification (Karaosmanoglu et al. 2018; Kaur et al. 2024). In IBA, where the perceived violation often relates to sacred or moral convictions (Hydock et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), these reactions may be even more intense.

A crucial factor in the aftermath of BT is consumers' willingness to forgive the brand. Forgiveness is defined as a “deliberate attempt to overcome unhappy feelings,” involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioural shifts from a negative to a more sympathetic stance (Maltby et al. 2001, p. 882; Davvetas et al. 2024). BT research shows that forgiveness depends on factors such as severity, brand attachment, familiarity, and expectations (Ahluwalia et al. 2000; Dawar and Pillutla 2000; Dawar and Lei 2009). While these insights are largely absent from IBA literature, they may be critical in understanding whether, and how, consumers can forgive brands whose activism clashes with their values.

Additionally, some scholars note that BT does not always damage brand image (Aaker et al. 2004; Schmalz and Orth 2012), as initial moral outrage can be short-lived. Haidt (2001) highlights that moral judgment is often rapid and intuitive. Translated to IBA, this suggests

that not all activism misaligned with consumer values will automatically have enduring negative consequences (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), opening space for recovery or acceptance under certain conditions. For example, BT studies indicate that prior brand knowledge and strong consumer-brand relationships can buffer negative impacts (Park et al. 2010; Ysseldyk and Wohl 2012). Moreover, because BT is typically accidental, it allows room for apology and corrective action (Ran et al. 2016; Fetscherin and Sampedro 2019). Apologies and remedial measures can foster forgiveness (Tsarenko and Tojib 2015; Wei and Ran 2019). However, IBA often involves intentional choices, making reactive strategies, such as retraction or apology, risky. In fact, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) show that withdrawing activism alienates supporters without winning over opponents, meaning BT recovery tactics may not map directly onto IBA contexts. This gap represents an opportunity for IBA research to explore alternative recovery approaches.

Where reactive strategies may be unsuitable, BT literature suggests that proactive measures, like CSR initiatives, can offset harm (Tsarenko and Tojib 2015). When customers are aware of a brand's CSR track record, the negative effects of BT diminish (Tsarenko and Tojib 2015). Hence, for IBA in culturally or religiously sensitive contexts such as Saudi Arabia, it can be argued that CSR initiatives aligned with Islamic values (e.g., charitable giving to orphans) may be particularly effective, yet this remains untested in BA research, making this a clear avenue for investigation.

Finally, both BT and IBA reactions are shaped by market context. For example, in product-harm crises, consumers in emerging markets may react more negatively toward global brands due to higher expectations (Sayin et al. 2024). However, for value-based violations, the opposite pattern can occur. Local brands are judged more harshly because they are perceived as cultural in-group members, identity (Özsomer 2012; Davvetas et al. 2024), and expected to align closely with local lifestyle values and preferences (Xie et al. 2015; De Vries and Fennis 2019). Similarly, the spillover effect of domestic brands' value transgressions generates stronger attention and negative publicity in comparison to foreign brands (Stäbler and Fischer 2020). Applied to IBA, this suggests that consumers might view local brands' misaligned activism as a betrayal, triggering harsher responses, lower forgiveness, and reduced purchase intentions than similar actions by foreign brands.

In short, while brand value transgressions can provoke severe consumer backlash, BT literature offers tested mechanisms, such as forgiveness drivers, brand relationship buffers, and proactive CSR, that could enrich our understanding of IBA. Yet, the intentional and ideological nature of IBA means some BT strategies may not transfer directly, marking a clear research gap in how to repair value-incongruent activism.

## 2.4 Customer Coping Strategies

This thesis employs Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) TTSC to analyse how Saudi customers respond to brands' positions on controversial issues that conflict with their religious and cultural norms (i.e., IBA). The theory helps explain how individuals and groups manage stress, challenges, and difficult situations, focusing on the mechanisms and strategies that people use to deal with stressors to maintain their psychological well-being. Thus, Lazarus and Folkman's theory provides a framework to describe, categorise, and analyse the potential coping strategies that Saudi customers might employ in response to IBA, which they may perceive as stressful and harmful.

Subsequent sections, therefore, start with the conceptual foundation of stress and coping theory that offers definitions and types of coping strategies. Following that, a small review of its applications in consumer behaviour studies offers insight into how consumers cope with various stressful situations. Finally, a general exploration of how Muslims deal with stress, particularly in the context of their religious and cultural norms, is provided.

### 2.4.1 Conceptual Foundation of The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

Stress is defined as an individual's exposure to stimuli that are appraised as harmful, threatening, or challenging, which exceed their capacity to cope (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Importantly, stress is not inherently caused by the individual or the environment; rather, it emerges from the dynamic interaction between personal factors and situational demands (Folkman 1984; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The TTSC posits that individuals are constantly evaluating environmental stimuli through an ongoing process of cognitive appraisal. This appraisal process triggers emotional responses, and when stimuli are perceived as threatening or challenging, individuals initiate coping strategies to manage the resulting stress or address the stressor directly (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Biggs et al. 2017). People are said to appraise a similar situation in different ways because they have

different personal agendas and due to the complexity of external settings, which leads to significant variation in individuals' responses to the same stressors (Lazarus 1991).

Within consumer research, responses to IBA can be conceptualised through the lens of TTSC. The theory identifies two interrelated processes: cognitive appraisal and coping process. Cognitive appraisal involves the evaluation and interpretation of both personal factors, such as values, beliefs, and goals, and environmental factors, such as situational demands and available resources (Biggs et al. 2017). Notably, individuals may appraise identical situations in different ways due to their unique goals, prior experiences, and interpretations of the environment (Lazarus 1991). Consequently, customers exposed to the same IBA may exhibit diverse responses based on their cognitive appraisal of the situation.

In other words, while Saudi customers may share the same broader cultural and environmental context, their perception of a brand's stance on divisive social issues may differ significantly. These differences are often shaped by the individual's interpretation of how the brand's actions affect personal or communal values. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguish two types of cognitive appraisal: primary and secondary. Primary appraisal refers to the initial evaluation of the stressor's significance for one's well-being. If the stressor is deemed consequential, secondary appraisal follows, which involves evaluating coping resources and considering potential strategies to manage or mitigate the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Biggs et al. 2017). For the present research, primary appraisal is particularly relevant, as it frames how IBA may be perceived as threatening or harmful to the consumer-brand relationship. Secondary appraisal entails an individual's assessment of situational factors in relation to their coping abilities and available resources (Schnebelen and Bruhn 2018). Cognitive appraisal is then a dynamic and fluid process, continuously influenced by both the nature of the stressor and the individual's evolving perception of their capacity to respond (Dewe and Cooper 2007). Once a situation is appraised as stressful in primary appraisal, secondary appraisal identifies the resources and strategies required to address or manage the stress, thereby triggering coping strategies (Biggs et al. 2017).

Folkman and Lazarus (1980) emphasise that coping strategies are not fixed traits or stable behavioural patterns; instead, they are dynamic processes shaped by the context and perceived demands of the stressor. Coping is defined as the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific internal and/or external demands that are

appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 141). This definition underscores the flexibility and adaptability of coping mechanisms, highlighting that individuals may deploy different strategies depending on the nature and intensity of the stressor.

Coping strategies can be distinguished along multiple dimensions. These include the focus of the coping effort (inward or outward), the function of the effort (problem-solving versus emotional regulation), perceived controllability of the situation, and the individual's sense of personal efficacy (El-Manstrly et al. 2021). For instance, some consumers may adopt outward-focused strategies, directly engaging with the brand to seek a resolution. Others may prefer inward-focused approaches, by regulating emotional responses or cognitively reframing the stressor to reduce distress (El-Manstrly et al. 2021).

Traditionally, coping strategies are classified into two broad categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Problem-focused coping involves direct actions aimed at confronting or resolving the source of stress, seeking to modify the stressful situation itself. Within consumer contexts, this may manifest as switching to another brand (Seth and Soch 2024) or seeking revenge against a brand perceived as transgressing personal values (Zourrig et al. 2009; Fetscherin and Sampedro 2019). Emotion-focused coping, in contrast, seeks to regulate the emotional impact of stress rather than alter the source. This may include expressing negative emotions (Goussinsky 2012), forgiving the brand (Worthington and Scherer 2004; Harrison-Walker 2019), or cognitively accepting the situation (Nakamura and Orth 2005).

While the problem-focused versus emotion-focused dichotomy is widely used, it has been criticised as overly simplistic in consumer research. Duhachek (2005) argues that consumers often apply both types of coping simultaneously in response to a single stressor. For example, a customer may emotionally console themselves while also taking concrete steps to seek reimbursement for a defective product, illustrating that problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Lazarus (1996) similarly asserts that these strategies are not separate but function in tandem depending on situational demands. Yi and Baumgartner (2004) further note that the abstract nature of these categories can make it difficult to categorically assign behaviours or cognitions to either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping.

As a result, Duhachek (2005) emphasises that additional coping strategies beyond this binary classification can be seen in consumer behaviour, and that their absence from previous studies has constrained the conceptual comprehension of coping in consumer contexts. To address these limitations, Duhachek (2005) proposes a more nuanced framework of eight coping strategies that better capture consumer behaviour: action, rational thinking, seeking emotional support, instrumental support, emotional venting, avoidance, positive thinking, and denial. Yi and Baumgartner (2004) also provide parallel typologies, demonstrating comparable distinctions tailored to consumer contexts. Both frameworks include strategies that align with problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, albeit under different labels and with varying emphases. These detailed classifications offer richer insights into how consumers manage stressors beyond the traditional two-category model. Tables 5 and 6 illustrate further descriptions and examples of each coping strategy in both coping models.

Additional models have also been adapted to explore consumer reactions to negative emotional experiences, such as brand hate. For instance, some studies apply the "fight or flight" model of coping (Lazarus 1991) to explain consumer reactions to brand hate (Bayarassou et al. 2020; Seth and Soch 2024). In this framework, "fight" coping strategies encompass aggressive or confrontational behaviours, including brand revenge, complaints, negative word-of-mouth, and boycotts. Conversely, "flight" coping strategies involve withdrawal from the brand relationship, such as brand switching, avoidance, or refusing future purchases from the offending brand (Fetscherin and Sampedro 2019; Bayarassou et al. 2020; Seth and Soch 2024). Zourrig et al. (2009) similarly utilise the fight-flight distinction, where "fight" involves actively confronting the issue to cause harm, such as seeking revenge, while "flight" refers to avoiding the problem by escaping uncomfortable emotions, such as through avoidance behaviour.

Overall, these studies illustrate that consumers employ a diverse range of coping strategies when confronted with stress-inducing brand interactions. While terminology and categorisation differ across research streams, there is consensus that coping strategies can be broadly classified according to whether they address the source of stress or its emotional consequences. Problem-focused coping aims to directly mitigate or resolve the stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping seeks to manage the individual's affective response. More specific typologies, such as those proposed by Duhachek (2005) or Yi and Baumgartner

(2004), provide additional granularity, capturing nuanced consumer responses that may not fit neatly into the traditional dichotomy.

For the purpose of this thesis, however, the established theoretical classification by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) is adopted, maintaining the distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. This choice is justified by its wide validation and use across consumer behaviour and marketing research (Worthington and Scherer 2004; Schnebelen and Bruhn 2018), and its ability to provide a clear conceptual framework for examining how customers respond to stressors, such as IBA. By adopting this framework, it becomes possible to systematically examine how Saudi consumers perceive and manage the stress induced by IBA, and to explore the potential pathways through which coping strategies mediate consumer responses.

In addition, it is also important to clarify why TTSC is adopted as the overarching lens in this thesis rather than alternative, equally relevant theoretical perspectives. Identity-based approaches, such as social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and CBI (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), offer powerful explanations of why consumers support or oppose brands that align or conflict with their in-groups. These frameworks are highly relevant for understanding and explaining why perceived threats to “Saudis” or “Muslims” may reduce purchase intention (e.g., Burbano 2021). However, identity-based models typically focus on how identification shapes attitudes and behaviour, rather than on the process by which consumers appraise stressors and then cope with them. They give strong predictions about when backlash may occur (e.g., Flight and Coker 2022) but say less about how consumers manage the resulting tension (e.g., through religiously motivated resistance or forgiveness). TTSC, by contrast, explicitly models the sequence from appraisal to coping, which is central to the research questions of this thesis.

Similarly, moral foundations theory and related moral-psychology perspectives (e.g., Haidt 2012; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020) likewise provide valuable insight into how underlying moral domains (e.g., care, fairness, loyalty, purity) shape reactions to brand positions on controversial issues. These accounts are particularly useful for explaining ideological polarisation in Western BA contexts. Yet, they generally treat moral foundations as relatively stable predispositions and tend to link them directly to attitudes and behavioural intentions. In the present context, the focus lies less on mapping consumers onto moral types and more on

understanding how a specific brand message is appraised as a threat to religious or cultural norms, and how consumers then cope with that threat. TTSC is better suited to capturing this situational, event-specific process, while moral foundations theory can be seen as more complementary background for understanding why certain appraisals are especially salient.

In sum, TTSC provides a robust conceptual foundation for understanding consumer responses to IBA. The theory emphasises the central role of cognitive appraisal in determining whether a situation is perceived as threatening or harmful, and the subsequent deployment of coping strategies to manage stress. This process of appraisal highlights how initial evaluations of the stressor's significance interact with perceptions of personal resources and coping efficacy to shape behavioural outcomes. By integrating these insights with well-established classifications of coping strategies, researchers can more precisely analyse the mechanisms through which stress-inducing brand behaviours influence consumer attitudes and actions. This approach provides both theoretical and practical insights into consumer-brand dynamics, particularly in culturally sensitive and value-laden contexts such as IBA.

**Table 5:** Consumer Coping Strategies in Response to Stressful Consumption Experiences  
(Adapted from Duhachek 2005, pp 44-46)

Coping strategy	Description	Example (consumer behaviour)
Action coping	“Direct, objective attempts to manage a source of stress”	A customer who receives a defective product and immediately contacts customer service to request a replacement or refund.
Rational thinking	“Deliberate attempts to prevent subjective emotions from directing behaviour”	A consumer calmly evaluates the pros and cons of a faulty product instead of reacting emotionally, deciding to give the brand a second chance based on past positive experiences.
Emotional support-seeking	“Attempts to marshal social resources to improve one’s emotional and/or mental state”	A customer who is upset after a bad purchase seeks reassurance and empathy from friends or family, asking for their opinion on how to handle the situation emotionally.
Instrumental support	“Attempts to marshal social resources to take action towards ameliorating a stressor”	A consumer asks for advice from friends or online forums about the best way to resolve an issue with a product, such as how to deal with a difficult return process or file a formal complaint.
Emotional venting	“Attempts to recognise and express one’s emotions.”	A consumer leaves a negative review online or rants on social

		media, expressing frustration over a poor product or service experience.
Avoidance coping	“Attempts to create psychic or physical distance between oneself and a stressor”	A customer, after a frustrating experience with a brand, avoids thinking about it by engaging in unrelated activities, like watching TV or shopping elsewhere, to distract from the issue.
Positive thinking	“Attempts to psychologically reconstrue a source of stress in order to make it more tolerable”	A consumer tries to focus on the positive aspects of a disappointing purchase, perhaps telling themselves, at least I got it at a discount, or it's not as bad as it could have been.
Denial coping	“Attempts to completely close off oneself mentally from a source of stress.”	A customer who experiences product dissatisfaction chooses to ignore the issue entirely, pretending it's not a problem and avoiding further confrontation or return processes.

**Table 6:** Consumer Coping Strategies in Response to Stressful Consumption Experiences  
(Adapted from Yi and Baumgartner 2004, pp 304-305)

Coping strategy	Description	Example (consumer behaviour)
Planful problem solving	Consumers actively think about how to address a stressful situation, devise a plan, and take steps to resolve it.	A consumer who receives a faulty product immediately devises a plan to contact customer service, follows up on the issue, and ensures a replacement or refund is provided.
Confrontive coping	Consumers confront the source of the problem, arguing their case and openly expressing displeasure to get the other party to change their stance.	A customer confronts the brand directly, either by writing a strong complaint or speaking with management, demanding compensation for a poor service or product failure.
Seeking social support	Consumers seek advice or emotional comfort from friends or acquaintances when dealing with negative emotions.	A consumer talks to friends or posts in an online forum, seeking advice or validation for their dissatisfaction with a brand's product or service, and asking for recommendations on how to resolve the issue.
Mental disengagement	Consumers try to forget or mentally distance themselves from the stressful experience by distracting themselves.	A consumer mentally disengages by ignoring the issue and avoiding further thoughts or actions related to the problem.
Behavioural disengagement	Consumers give up on trying to resolve the problem, acknowledging that no further action will change the situation.	A consumer decides not to pursue a return or complaint after a bad experience with a product, believing that the effort will be futile and simply accepts the loss.

Positive reinterpretation	Consumers try to find a positive aspect in the negative experience and view it as an opportunity to learn or grow.	After receiving a disappointing product, a customer reflects on the situation and tells themselves, this experience taught me to read reviews more carefully before purchasing.
Self-control	Consumers cope by controlling their emotions, keeping their feelings to themselves and not displaying them to others.	A consumer is frustrated with a poor customer service experience but decides to keep their emotions in check, staying calm and not expressing their anger outwardly.
Acceptance	Consumers come to terms with the situation, accepting that it cannot be changed, and may even recognise their own role in the problem.	A customer who purchases a product they later regret acknowledges that they made a mistake in choosing the item and accepts the loss without attempting to seek a refund or change the situation.

#### 2.4.2 Coping Strategies in Consumer Behaviour Research

In consumer research, coping is described as “the set of cognitive and behavioural processes initiated by consumers in response to emotionally arousing, stress-inducing interactions with the environment aimed at bringing forth more desirable emotional states and reduced levels of stress” (Duhachek 2005, p. 42). From the perspective of the TTSC, coping reflects the strategies individuals deploy after cognitively appraising a stressor, which, in the context of this thesis, may include a brand’s engagement in ideologically or religiously sensitive activism. Cognitive appraisal determines whether a customer perceives the situation as threatening, challenging, or harmful to their values, self-concept, or social identity. Once a stressor is appraised as significant, customers select coping strategies aimed at managing their emotional response, addressing the stressor, or both.

The strategies that customers employ to cope with stressful events are often shaped by how a brand communicates following a stressful or negative incident. For example, when a brand provides explanations for a transgression, it can help mitigate the discomfort customers experience (Davidow 2003). The type of explanation, whether retrospective (explaining why the transgression occurred) or prospective (indicating what will happen next), can reduce feelings of anger, frustration, or helplessness in customers (Gelbrich 2010). Both approaches can influence whether a customer engages in confrontive or more emotionally regulated coping strategies. In the context of IBA, such communication may play a critical role in

shaping the cognitive appraisal of the brand's actions and influencing the intensity of the stress response.

Cultural background further affects coping strategy selection (Zourrig et al. 2009). Research demonstrates that independent, Western cultures often employ problem-focused coping, directly addressing the source of stress, whereas interdependent, Eastern cultures tend to adopt emotion-focused strategies, managing the emotional consequences of the stressor rather than confronting the problem itself (Hardie et al. 2006). Fischer et al. (2010) extend this perspective to religious contexts, noting that Muslims and Christians may differ in coping preferences due to variations in religious teachings and practices. This variation highlights the importance of cultural context to understand how customers respond to stress-inducing interactions with brands. Within this research context, customers' appraisal of IBA may then be filtered through shared cultural and religious frameworks, leading some individuals to prioritise emotion-focused coping strategies, such as acceptance or forgiveness, while others may respond with problem-focused strategies, such as actively voicing disapproval or disengaging from the brand.

Perceptions of controllability and changeability also influence coping choices. Yi and Baumgartner (2004) argue that when a customer perceives a negative event as changeable, they are more likely to adopt confrontive coping strategies, voicing complaints (Fetscherin and Sampedro 2019) or engaging in vindictive negative word-of-mouth (Gelbrich 2010). Conversely, if the stressor is perceived as immutable, customers tend to employ disengagement strategies, such as avoidance, mental distancing, or attempts to forget the issue (Yi and Baumgartner 2004). Therefore, in cases of IBA, it can be argued that when customers perceive a brand's ideological stance as enduring and unchangeable, emotion-focused coping strategies, such as acceptance, reframing, or selective forgiveness, are more likely to dominate. The attribution of blame is another critical determinant of coping responses (Yi and Baumgartner 2004; Menon and Dubé 2007). When customers perceive themselves as responsible for the stressor (internal attribution), they may engage in acceptance or positive reinterpretation strategies, effectively regulating negative emotions without confronting the brand (Yi and Baumgartner 2004).

In contrast, when the brand or an external actor is held responsible, confrontive coping strategies, including negative word-of-mouth (nWOM), complaints, or avoidance, are more

prevalent (Menon and Dubé 2007). This is because external blame consolidates helplessness and anger, feelings more typically associated with confrontive coping behaviours (Gelbrich 2010). If there is less negative emotion experienced by customers, like frustration, they may derive emotional support through avenues such as support-seeking nWOM (Gelbrich 2010). These responses reflect the customer's cognitive appraisal of the stressor as both significant and externally imposed, which motivates actions aimed at restoring perceived justice or emotional equilibrium. For instance, a Saudi customer perceiving a brand's stance on gender equality in sports as conflicting with religious norms may direct anger and disappointment outward, resulting in nWOM or disengagement from the brand relationship. Hence, coping strategies in consumer behaviour are multifaceted and contextually sensitive, reflecting the importance of investigating them across diverse cultural settings. Examining a religious and conservative Eastern context, such as Saudi Arabia, offers the opportunity to identify coping strategies that are uniquely shaped by prevailing cultural values, social norms, and religious principles, thereby enriching existing theory with context-specific insights.

#### **2.4.3 Muslims' Coping Strategies for Stressful Events**

Religion plays a profound role in shaping how individuals perceive, respond to, and manage stressful events, influencing both their emotional regulation and behavioural choices (Fischer et al. 2010). In Muslim-majority societies, such as Saudi Arabia, self-identity is deeply embedded within collectivistic and community-oriented values, in contrast to the more individualistic orientation often observed in Western societies (Hofstede 2001; Schimmack et al. 2005). Fischer et al. (2010) suggest that these cultural orientations shape coping tendencies, with Muslims often gravitating towards interpersonal strategies, such as seeking social support, while Western Christians tend to rely more on intrapersonal strategies such as individual problem-solving or withdrawal. Understanding how Muslims cope with stress, therefore, requires an examination of the religious principles, cultural norms, and shared values that guide their appraisal of and response to life's challenges.

Religious practices often provide a tangible and immediate means of managing stress within Muslim communities. Salat, the ritual prayer performed five times a day, fulfils not only a core religious obligation but also serves as a structured practice for emotional regulation and mental grounding. Nath et al. (2022) have shown that Salat can significantly enhance overall well-being, while Achour et al. (2021) found it to act as a moderating factor between job stress and life satisfaction among Malaysian Muslim nurses. Listening to recitations of the

Qur'an has also been found to ease anxiety and reduce negative emotions, functioning as a widely accessible and low-cost intervention for psychological distress (Moulaei et al. 2023; Bano et al. 2025). These rituals are more than symbolic acts; they are integral coping mechanisms that sustain resilience, provide inner calm, and reaffirm a sense of divine connection during times of strain.

Beyond ritual practice, Islamic teachings offer interpretive frameworks that shape how believers cognitively appraise stressors. Life's adversities are often understood as part of a divinely ordained plan, intended as tests of faith that strengthen spiritual commitment (Mahamid and Bdier 2021). At the same time, Islam discourages despair, urging believers to maintain hope in God's mercy (Mahamid and Bdier 2021). This perspective enables a dual approach to coping: believers may engage in problem-focused strategies to actively address the source of difficulty while simultaneously drawing upon faith-based acceptance to endure situations beyond their control (Mattis 2002). For Saudi consumers, such cognitive framing could mean actively changing consumption patterns in response to value conflicts while also maintaining emotional balance through religious reassurance.

Several key Islamic principles illustrate how faith translates into coping strategies. Tawakkul, or reliance on God, involves trusting in divine wisdom and accepting that adversity may hold an unseen purpose (Librande 2005; Achour et al. 2016; Gondal et al 2023; Bano et al. 2025). This belief is encapsulated in Qur'an 2:216: "It may well be that you dislike a thing but it is good for you, and it may well be that you like a thing but it is bad for you. God knows, and you do not know." Furthermore, Sabr, or patience, entails steadfastness in obedience to God, refraining from resentment toward divine decree, and meeting adversity with resilience (al-Uthaymin 1992). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught that both favourable and adverse events can be sources of goodness when met with gratitude or patience, reframing hardship as an opportunity for spiritual growth, reinforced through prayer, ritual, and community solidarity (Achour et al. 2016). Islamic teachings also promote positive reappraisal, encouraging believers to see potential hidden benefits in seemingly harmful events, thereby reducing perceived threat and promoting acceptance (Machouche et al. 2012; Achour et al. 2016). Social support plays a central role, with Islam placing great emphasis on communal bonds and mutual assistance, particularly during hardship (Achour et al. 2016). Turning to family and peers for emotional and moral support not only sustains resilience but also reaffirms shared values and identity.

In the context of IBA, these religious coping strategies take on particular relevance. When a brand adopts a stance perceived as conflicting with Islamic values, such as advocacy for causes at odds with certain religious interpretations, Muslim consumers may engage in Tawakkul by reaffirming their trust in God's plan, or practise Sabr, accepting the situation as a test of faith (e.g., Bano et al. 2025). Such approaches help regulate emotional responses, especially when the consumer perceives the situation as stressful and beyond their ability to change (e.g., Gondal et al 2023). Others may express disapproval through private conversations or social media posts, framing these actions as fulfilling the religious duty of enjoining good and forbidding wrong. This form of coping serves both to release emotional tension and to reinforce religious identity when confronted with perceived moral challenges. Positive reappraisal can mitigate initial negative reactions, encouraging consumers to place the brand's behaviour within a broader spiritual framework. Similarly, reliance on social support networks can provide both comfort and collective affirmation, buffering the psychological impact of value incongruence.

These patterns highlight that Muslim consumers' responses to BA are not uniformly oppositional. Some may opt for active resistance, such as boycotts, while others adopt emotion-focused strategies rooted in religious principles, such as Tawakkul or Sabr, to manage distress without engaging in direct confrontation. This variability suggests that religious coping can function not only as a driver of consumer resistance but also as a regulating force that tempers the consequences of IBA.

## **2.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter reviews the literature on BA and, in particular, focuses on the value-incongruence consequences for customers in religious and culturally conservative settings. The chapter begins with the conceptualisation of BA and how it differs from analogous concepts such as CSR, corporate political advocacy, and cause-related marketing. Despite the increasing prevalence of BA, the review observes conceptual shortcomings and theory gaps in the way BA has been conceived and studied. To explain the existence of such gaps, this chapter proposes the concept of IBA as brand stances that contradict the values of certain segments of consumers, which may lead to backlash, resistance, or psychic discomfort.

The review further explores the role of religion, specifically introducing the Islamic moral norms as a consistent framework affecting consumer expectations and reactions in Saudi Arabia. The chapter also proves the influence of religion on Saudi consumers' evaluation of brand morality and appropriateness through using Islamic norms, such as halal, haram, and the practice of enjoining good and forbidding wrong. The chapter also examines the behaviour of brand transgressions and value transgressions, and it explores empirical studies of the undesirable consequences of perceived transgression of moral or cultural norms.

Finally, the chapter presents TTSC as a theory to describe consumers' appraisals and coping strategies to IBA. In addition, it distinguishes between coping strategies as problem-focused or emotion-focused according to models by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Duhachek (2005), and Yi and Baumgartner (2004). The final section of the chapter is left for Islamic coping, where emphasis lies on the unique ways in which Muslim consumers have been employing religious and communal coping mechanisms, such as Tawakkul, Sabr, emotional venting, and communal support, to cope with stressful situations. Overall, the chapter provides theoretical, religious, and cultural rationale for examining Saudi consumers' psychological and behavioural responses to IBA and provides a new contribution to the BA literature in such value-sensitive markets.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology: Research Philosophy and Overall Research Design

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the philosophical and methodological foundations of the research. It begins by discussing the adopted research philosophy, highlighting the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions underpinning this study. It then presents the rationale for employing a mixed methods design and explains the abductive reasoning approach used to integrate qualitative and quantitative data. The chapter also details the integration strategies across different stages of the research process and justifies the selection of specific controversial issues explored in both phases. Finally, it addresses the ethical considerations implemented to ensure participants' rights, safety, and confidentiality.

### 3.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy can be described as the beliefs, principles, and assumptions that guide a researcher in conceptualising and conducting their research (Saunders et al. 2015). This set of beliefs is then the foundation of the research design, methods, and data interpretations. It affects how the researchers observe reality, knowledge, and relationships between the researcher and the study subject (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Thus, it is paramount to adopt a research philosophy that underpins the current research methodology to achieve a reliable outcome and a coherent understanding of consumers' responses to brands engaging in controversial issues. Three main research assumptions distinguish research philosophies: ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Saunders et al. 2015).

- i. **Ontology:** The way truth and reality are defined by the researcher.
- ii. **Epistemology:** The process by which the researcher determines the truth and reality.
- iii. **Methodology:** The adapted method to conduct the research.

These three research suppositions result in a research paradigm where each paradigm embraces a different perspective of the worldview (Grix 2002). The research paradigm encompasses a comprehensive framework of interconnected practices and views that specifies the nature of inquiry across these three assumptions (Antwi and Hamza 2015). Therefore, the selection of the research methodology is determined by the researcher's

philosophical position and interpretations of these three assumptions as they guide the entire research strategy, method, and analysis.

Thus, in the following sub-sections, an overall review of each assumption and how they are presented in this research is provided. Also, a critical discussion of the selected philosophical position and the reasons that underpin the researcher's perspective is presented.

### **3.2.1 Ontology**

Ontology is deemed to be the starting point of all researchers from which one's epistemological and methodological stances flow naturally (Grix 2002). It refers to the nature of reality and what we know about its existence (Saunders et al. 2015). Ontology, thus, deals with how to explain social facts, relations, and processes. Specifically, it is defined as the "science or study of being" (Blaikie 2003, p. 8). In other words, one's ontological viewpoint is the response to "what is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated?" (Hay 2002, p. 63). To answer this question, two main ontological perspectives are mostly dominating, which are the views of objectivism and constructivism (Clark et al. 2021). These debates are particularly relevant for branding research, where a brand can be seen either as an objective entity (e.g., its logos, products) or as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by consumer perceptions.

According to Grix (2002), the ontological viewpoint in objectivism suggests that social phenomena or entities, and their meanings, are viewed as existing independently of social actors. Therefore, regardless of how social actors (e.g., individuals) perceive and name social entities, objectivism sees their existence in the same way as physical entities (Clark et al. 2021). According to this perspective, brands are viewed as an objective, tangible entity with distinct characteristics and attributes that exist irrespective of individual views or interpretations. For example, a brand's components, logos, slogans, and product features all contribute to defining and maintaining its identity and existence. Thus, brands are seen as a concrete, measurable entity that can be observed, analysed, and manipulated.

Contrarily, constructivism holds that social actors' perceptions and behaviours continuously shape reality or social phenomena and their meanings (Saunders et al. 2015). It suggests that social phenomena by themselves should not be the subject of interpretation, but rather the interpretations of social actors are what need to be under investigation. Since social

phenomena are perceived as the social products of our perception of reality, this perspective suggests that they are in a constant state of revision (Clark et al. 2021). Accordingly, constructivism embraces the concept of multiple realities, which argues that knowledge is viewed as transient and contingent on both time and place rather than as fixed (Clark et al. 2021). To put it another way, constructivism is the belief that brands are created by society and are influenced by people's perceptions, interpretations, and interactions. In this perspective, brands have a subjective quality that depends on shared cultural meanings. Thus, this viewpoint emphasises the relevance of the socio-cultural settings in which brands function as well as the range of perceptions they generate among people and communities.

These explanations may appear to position objectivism and constructivism as incompatible ontological stances. However, post-positivism offers an alternative position that acknowledges elements of both perspectives. Post-positivism assumes that a reality exists independently of the researcher but recognises that this reality can never be fully or perfectly apprehended due to contextual influences, measurement limitations, and the interpretive role of human cognition (Crotty 1998; Phillips and Burbules 2000). From this view, social phenomena are treated as real and patterned, yet only imperfectly observable, and any knowledge claims about them are necessarily provisional and open to refinement (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Phillips and Burbules 2000).

Accordingly, this study adopts a post-positivist ontological perspective, which assumes that consumers' responses to BA reflect an underlying reality, while accepting that this reality is filtered through cultural, religious, and social contexts. In the context of branding and consumer research, this position recognises that brands and activist messages exist as external stimuli, but that their meanings, consequences, and perceived significance vary systematically across individuals and groups (Hunt 2016). Thus, while consumer interpretations of IBA may differ, these interpretations are not treated as arbitrary or purely subjective; rather, they are understood as patterned responses shaped by shared cultural and religious structures that can be empirically examined.

This ontological stance is particularly appropriate given the emerging and context-sensitive nature of BA research. Post-positivism allows the thesis to investigate stable relationships between value incongruence, cognitive appraisals, coping strategies, and behavioural outcomes, while acknowledging that these relationships are probabilistic rather than

deterministic and may evolve across contexts and over time. By adopting this position, the research maintains ontological realism regarding the existence of consumer responses and behavioural tendencies, while remaining sensitive to contextual variation within a religious and conservative society, such as Saudi Arabia.

### **3.2.2 Epistemology**

If ontology is the study of what we know, then epistemology, as Lewis-Beck et al. (2004, p. 310) state, is "how we know what we know." Epistemology is related to how human beings approach knowledge of the world surrounding them (Saunders et al. 2015). Therefore, epistemology concentrates on what kind of knowledge is attainable and whether this knowledge is reliable and adequate (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Positivism and constructionism (or interpretivism) have been the two main epistemological philosophies that have dominated the social sciences (Saunders et al. 2015).

Positivism involves the idea that knowledge is sought through sensory experience and empirical observations (i.e., observable knowledge) rather than subjective or cognitive processes (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). This epistemology philosophy is then associated with the ontological viewpoint in objectivism as it emphasises the importance of independence and objectivity in acquiring knowledge (Clark et al. 2021). The positivist philosophy intends to minimise the prejudices and values of researchers that could taint their work by following approaches that are adapted in natural science (Grix 2002). Also, a main aim of this philosophy is to generate lawlike generalisations that are general in scope and consistent across time and contexts (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Thus, it investigates the mode of inquiry that seeks causal relationships where one variable causes a change in another (Saunders et al. 2015).

On the other hand, interpretivism holds a constructivist ontological perspective, whereas it focuses on understanding and investigating the various perceptions across the social actors (i.e., unobservable knowledge), such as feelings and opinions (Bryman et al. 2022). It implies that knowledge is socially constructed through the interpretation of meanings, contexts, and perspectives of the social actors (Saunders et al. 2015). Therefore, the mode of inquiry of this philosophy is centred on investigating the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals, as it is considered the source of reality (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Put differently, constructivism acknowledges that the same

phenomenon (e.g., BA) may be interpreted differently among individuals due to their subjective interpretations. Therefore, this philosophy emphasises the importance that a researcher should immerse themselves in the data to obtain and uncover the meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to their actions and interactions of such phenomena (Clark et al. 2021).

As discussed in the ontological section, a post-positivist paradigm offers a middle position between positivism and interpretivism. Post-positivism retains the positivist commitment to empirical inquiry, explanation, and causal modelling, while rejecting the assumption that social reality can be known with complete objectivity or certainty (Phillips and Burbules 2000; Creswell and Clark 2018). From a post-positivist epistemological perspective, knowledge is generated through systematic observation and measurement but is always considered partial, theory-laden, and open to revision. Researchers, therefore, aim not to discover absolute truths but to develop increasingly robust explanations that approximate reality through critical testing, triangulation, and methodological rigour (Lincoln et al. 2018).

Accordingly, this study adopts a post-positivist epistemology, which assumes that consumers' responses to BA reflect underlying psychological and social mechanisms that can be empirically examined, while acknowledging that these mechanisms are mediated by cultural, religious, and contextual interpretations. In this research, knowledge is produced by combining interpretive insights from qualitative interviews with hypothesis testing and causal modelling in experimental studies. The qualitative phase enables the identification of contextually grounded meanings, perceptions, and appraisals, while the quantitative phase tests the strength, direction, and structure of relationships among these constructs. This approach reflects the post-positivist emphasis on explanation rather than pure description, and on theory refinement rather than theory confirmation (Creswell 2014; Clark et al. 2021). In the context of BA research, this epistemological stance recognises that BA exists as an observable stimulus, but that its meaning and impact are filtered through consumers' cultural and religious value systems. For example, the same activist message may be interpreted as empowerment by some consumers and as moral violation by others. A post-positivist epistemology allows these subjective interpretations to be systematically examined without reducing them to purely individual narratives or treating them as unknowable. Instead, it enables the identification of patterned regularities in how consumers appraise and cope with IBA, while remaining open to contextual variation and theoretical refinement. This makes

post-positivism particularly well suited to the sequential mixed-methods design adopted in this thesis and to the study of culturally embedded consumer responses to ideologically sensitive brand behaviour.

### **3.2.3 Methodology**

After a review and discussion on the nature of reality (i.e., ontology) and how we discover reality and knowledge (i.e., epistemology), it is of paramount importance to determine the method of detecting this knowledge. Methodology, thus, involves applying ontological and epistemological principles to the techniques and procedures for generating and collecting research data (Antwi and Hamza 2015). Research can be conducted through three primary methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.

Qualitative research is a method utilised to discover and understand complex phenomena in depth. It entails gathering comprehensive and rich data using non-numerical sources such as interviews and observations (Guba and Lincoln 1994). As such, its goal is to uncover the underlying meanings, patterns and experiences that could be difficult to measure (Fossey et al. 2002). Thus, it often entails the researcher fully immersing oneself in the research context to obtain such a holistic understanding of the social phenomena (Antwi and Hamza 2015). From these descriptions, it can be inferred that qualitative research follows an interpretive epistemology and constructionist ontology perspectives (Antwi and Hamza 2015). This means that qualitative researchers believe in the notion of multiple realities and that knowledge and meanings are rooted and varied across individuals' perspectives (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Consequently, qualitative research is usually utilised in exploratory research methods to describe the local contexts, discover new hypotheses or theories, and explore new phenomena (Antwi and Hamza 2015). Therefore, as the BA research has not been examined in the Saudi context (to the researcher's best knowledge) and is still in its early stage, qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, can provide paramount insights into unpacking and understanding Saudi consumers' perspectives and responses toward BA.

While qualitative research provides depth, it lacks generalisability (Saunders et al. 2015). Quantitative research, in contrast, seeks generalisation by testing relationships and hypotheses between variables (Clark et al. 2021). It follows natural sciences methods and adopts the concept of objectivity or free-value research to avoid human bias by depending on mathematical and statistical techniques (Saunders et al. 2015). Therefore, quantitative

researchers assume that behaviours and perceptions are generally predictable and explainable (Antwi and Hamza 2015). In other words, they believe that there is one reality (i.e., objectivism) and that knowledge is observable (i.e., positivism) and measurable through systematic and standardised techniques, such as experiments (Antwi and Hamza 2015).

Nonetheless, the challenge in this assumption is that when it comes to the nature of knowledge, social sciences vary greatly from natural sciences, especially since much of it is not by nature observable (Maarouf 2019). Variables such as feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions are not tangible objects that can be measured like objects in natural sciences; rather, they should be communicated and comprehended through interpretation (Ma 2012). Moreover, quantitative research requires previous knowledge about the social phenomenon and context so that it can test its theory and hypotheses; hence, in new context research (e.g., Saudi Arabia) and social phenomenon (e.g., BA), quantitative research may not be the ideal approach.

Consequently, many researchers attempt to overcome these obstructions by integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single study. They advocate for mixed-methods research to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the subject through incorporating both numerical data, such as statistical measures, and non-numerical data, like quotes from interviews. In essence, mixed methods research enables the usage of both exploratory (qualitative) and confirmatory (quantitative) methods in a unified study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Therefore, post-positivism is particularly well-suited to mixed-methods designs, as it supports the use of multiple methods to triangulate evidence, approximate objective reality more closely, and critically address the limitations inherent in any single approach (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Phillips and Burbules 2000). Through triangulation, post-positivist researchers strive to mitigate biases, enhance validity, and build more robust approximations of underlying mechanisms, while acknowledging that all observations remain fallible and contextually influenced.

Moreover, in post-positivism, theories and generalisations are regarded as conjectural and subject to revision in light of new empirical evidence or contextual shifts. When exploring underexplored phenomena (e.g., BA) or new cultural contexts (e.g., Saudi Arabia), a post-positivist researcher may begin with qualitative approaches to refine theoretical understanding and identify context-specific mechanisms, subsequently developing

measurable constructs and hypotheses that can be tested quantitatively. Thus, in studying BA in Saudi Arabia, where little prior research exists and cultural interpretations differ markedly from Western contexts, mixed methods provide the dual benefit of uncovering contextually grounded insights (qualitative) and rigorously testing their causal relationships and broader applicability (quantitative). Therefore, this research adopts a mixed-methods approach, as its alignment with the post-positivist paradigm fits the study's objectives and allows for an in-depth, critically rigorous, and holistic understanding of Saudi customers' responses to brands engaging in controversial issues. In the following sections, I will outline the research design, reflecting on the advantages of mixed methods research and discussing its implementation in this study.

### **3.3 Research Design - Mixed Methods**

The research design refers to the overall research strategy and framework in order to achieve the research objectives (Clark et al. 2021). It not only outlines the steps and techniques to answer the research questions but also reflects the logic of such practices (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). As research design includes the research method, which is the approach for collecting data, such as a semi-structured interview or an experiment (Clark et al. 2021), it is of paramount importance to select the most appropriate research design that allows using suitable research methods to investigate the research problem. Consequently, the selected research design of this study is mixed methods research. The mixed research method implies the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods or elements of each, such as viewpoints, data collection, and analysis, to achieve a comprehensive understanding and corroboration of the research problem (Johnson et al. 2007). This ability of method combination leverages the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches while compensating for their weaknesses. Another benefit of mixed methods research is the concept of "triangulation," which helps reduce practical biases, such as measurement and sampling errors (Clark et al. 2021). It also involves using one method to validate and cross-check the results obtained from another method (Clark et al. 2021).

Moreover, besides the importance of considering research questions when selecting the research design, researchers also ought to think of the relationship between research and theory, such as testing or generating theory (De Vaus 2001). By this, researchers often follow either inductive or deductive reasoning strategies. Inductive reasoning refers to the tendency toward discovery and theory generation through searching for patterns in the research data

(Antwi and Hamza 2015). It often involves starting with specific observations and then seeking to produce a general understanding or hypothesis based on those observations (Saunders et al. 2015). This approach allows the study's design to evolve gradually, rather than being fully determined at the beginning (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Consequently, the logic of inductive reasoning is often favoured by interpretive researchers employing qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, as it enables them to immerse themselves in the data to explore and uncover these patterns.

By contrast, deductive reasoning tests existing theories or hypotheses by moving from general premises to specific cases (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Researchers following deductive reasoning, therefore, move from theories to data, such as starting with general theories or principles and then applying them to a specific situation to achieve a particular conclusion. It is designed so that it examines such relationships, co-occurrences, or even causation (Clark et al. 2021). Thus, deductive reasoning is typically associated with positivist researchers adopting quantitative methods, such as experiments and surveys, as it permits them to examine relationships and confirm the research hypotheses (Morse 2010).

For this study, I choose to employ abductive reasoning, which offers a middle ground between inductive and deductive approaches (Clark et al. 2021). It involves moving back and forth from data to theory or vice versa; that is, the researcher's thoughts on both data and theory simultaneously (Clark et al. 2021). According to Saunders et al. (2015), abductive reasoning seeks to offer the most reasonable explanation for a social phenomenon by identifying patterns in data (i.e., inductive) to either refine an existing theory or construct a new one, which is then tested through further data collection (i.e., deductive). The logic of abductive reasoning is also consistent with post-positivism as it urges researchers to draw logical interpretations and construct theories based on observations about the world (Bryman et al. 2022). Also, abductive reasoning is suitable for mixed methods research as it allows the researcher to engage with data inductively through qualitative methods and subsequently deduce hypotheses that can be tested empirically through quantitative methods (Clark et al. 2021). In this study, abductive reasoning is particularly useful as it enables me to first explore Saudi consumers' perspectives on BA qualitatively, then refine and test emerging theoretical insights quantitatively.

Based on these explanations, it is evident that combining qualitative and quantitative methods in mixed methods research offers numerous advantages. Yet, within the research

design, it's crucial for researchers to establish a systematic approach for integrating these methods to ensure reliable results and credible interpretations. Fetters et al. (2013) elaborate on how the integration of mixed methods research can occur at various stages, including research design, methods, and reporting. Subsequent sections will delve deeper into discussions and specifics regarding the integration of mixed methods research.

### 3.3.1 Integration at The Level of Research Design

Fetters et al. (2013) identify three types of mixed methods research integration at the research design level: exploratory sequential, explanatory sequential, and convergent. In sequential designs, researchers depend on the method of phase one to inform the method in phase two. In contrast, at the convergent level, the aim is to merge the two approaches (qualitative and quantitative) to compare the results (Fetters et al. 2013). Table 7 highlights the main differences among the designs.

**Table 7:** Types of Integration at The Research Design Level (Fetters et al. 2013)

	<b>Key features</b>	<b>Sequence</b>	<b>Objective</b>
<b>Exploratory Sequential Design</b>	The use of a qualitative approach to enhance the lack of existing knowledge by generating hypotheses that can be tested using quantitative methods.	Qualitative followed by quantitative	Exploration
<b>Explanatory Sequential Design</b>	The need for further insights or understanding of existing quantitative data through qualitative exploration.	Quantitative followed by qualitative	Explanation
<b>Convergent Design</b>	Related to the idea of triangulation, in which the study attempts to use the advantages of both approaches to offset the weaknesses of each.	Parallel qualitative and quantitative	Comparison

This study adopts an exploratory sequential design where the researcher begins with qualitative data collection (phase one), followed by quantitative data collection (phase two), consecutively (Creswell et al. 2018). The qualitative phase in this approach is utilised to explore the phenomenon under study, especially when there is a lack of knowledge, to identify key themes or hypotheses that are subsequently measured in phase two or quantitative methods (Creswell et al. 2018). Thus, this research design allows the conduct of

such focused quantitative investigations through the findings from qualitative data, resulting in a depth and breadth understanding of the research topic.

Exploratory sequential design is specifically important in the context of BA because much existing research has mainly focused on experimental studies or content analysis (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Mirzaei et al. 2022; Cammarota et al. 2023). However, the exploration of BA within an emerging market context (i.e., Saudi Arabia) calls for a qualitative approach to build a culturally grounded understanding of the phenomenon. This method allows researchers to delve into how Saudi consumers interpret, cope with, and react to activist stances. Utilising a qualitative approach is fitting because it offers insights into participants' perceptions and emotions regarding IBA, enabling them to articulate their religious, cultural, and moral values. In other words, depending exclusively on quantitative research may lead to disregarding some important variables that reflect the local contexts. However, qualitative research is not meant to be generalised. Thus, quantitative research in phase two can subsequently examine the causal relationship and confirm the outcomes of the qualitative study at a larger scale, resulting in more robust findings and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Hence, this sequential approach not only uncovers local nuances but also ensures that findings are generalisable and actionable for brand management in culturally sensitive contexts.

### **3.3.2 Integration at The Level of Research Method and Reporting**

To produce sound mixed methods research, it is vital to ensure a clear and transparent integration process throughout the various stages. This integration should elucidate not only the approach taken in research design but also how it connects across data collection and analysis. Creswell and Clark (2018) outline four methods of linkage: (1) connecting, (2) building, (3) merging, and (4) embedding.

First, integration at the connection level takes place when two distinct sets of data are linked together through the sample frame. For instance, interview participants may be selected from among survey respondents. Second, integration at the building level involves utilising data collected in the first phase to enhance the second phase of data collection. For example, survey items may be developed based on insights gathered from interview data. This approach resonates with this research objective as it plans to use the findings from the interview data to identify variables and formulate hypotheses, which will then be examined in

the subsequent quantitative phase. Third, integration at the merging level occurs when a researcher simultaneously brings and analyses the two data sets for comparison. Data is often merged after analysing both qualitative and quantitative data separately. Lastly, integration at the embedding level results from the use and linking of both data collection and analysis at multiple points.

Moreover, integration is proceeding through the research report. The integration at this stage can enhance the depth and breadth of research findings. As Fetters et al. (2013) explain, this stage of integration contains three approaches: (1) integrating through narrative, (2) integrating through data transformation, and (3) integrating through joint displays.

First, integrating through a narrative approach refers to the description of both qualitative and quantitative results through a single report or a sequence of reports. Within the narrative integration, we can further distinguish three main approaches: weaving, contiguous, and staged. In the weaving approach, researchers write and report the research findings of both qualitative and quantitative data at once, such as on a theme-by-theme or concept-by-concept basis. For example, a researcher can weave some insights from interview data into quantitative findings, such as when the researcher describes a participant's emotion about an event, followed by quantitative evidence.

The following narrative approach is contiguous and involves reporting a single report; yet, the findings of each method, qualitative and quantitative, are presented separately but in adjacent sections. Despite the separation of each method of reporting, both methods ought to be logically connected. This study, therefore, adopts the contiguous narrative approach as it plans to disclose the findings of the qualitative data first (phase one) and then report the results of the quantitative method (phase two). This approach allows readers to compare qualitative and quantitative findings. Also, the contiguous narrative approach entails a methodology transparency process as the researcher can describe in detail the sources of data collection and analysis procedures in each method. Further, since the thesis adopts a building method approach (i.e., integration at the method level), a contiguous approach facilitates reflecting the process of complementary perspectives. Specifically, it displays how I build the research hypotheses and variables from the qualitative data and subsequently measure them in the quantitative method (i.e., experiment). The last narrative approach is staged, which typically occurs in mixed methods research that follows a multistage research design; rather

than basic mixed methods designs (e.g., this study). In this approach, data are presented and analysed in distinct stages and published separately.

Second, data integration through transformation takes place when one set of data is converted into another set of data. It consists of two primary steps: converting the data and then integrating the converted data with the non-transformed data. To clarify, one may convert qualitative data into numeric data, such as counting the frequency of codes (step one), and consequently measure them on a quantitative basis (step two). The third kind of integration is joint displays, which refers to visually exhibiting qualitative and quantitative data together in a single visual representation. It makes it possible for researchers and readers to compare findings. This integration approach, hence, comprises tables, charts, diagrams, or graphs that illustrate patterns, relationships, or differences across both types of data. In the following chapters, the specific process of the adopted approaches in this thesis, the qualitative method (Chapter 4) and the quantitative method (Chapter 7) are presented.

### **3.4 Controversial Issues Selection and Justification**

From the previous introduction of BA, it can be inferred that a critical characteristic of the BA concept is that it is constructed around the partisan nature of the problems it addresses (Moorman 2020). This implies a lack of consensus as various stakeholders (e.g., consumers, investors, employees, and policymakers) are likely to behave differently towards an issue, with some wanting to keep things as they are and others wishing to bring about change (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Thus, when engaging on these divisive topics, a brand must decide whether to challenge or support the status quo, such as supporting or opposing same-sex marriage, immigration, and racial justice. However, the classification of an issue to be controversial or consensual varies, evolves through time, and is influenced by cultural contexts (Nalick et al. 2016). In other words, an issue that is contentious in the United Kingdom today may not be perceived as controversial at the same time in Saudi Arabia, and it is unlikely that it will be controversial in the future. For example, allowing women to drive is not a contentious topic in the United Kingdom, but when the decision was revealed in Saudi Arabia in 2018, it was. However, it is unlikely to be as contentious in 2025 as it was in 2018.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the focal issues of this thesis are perceived as both controversial and relevant by Saudis for accurately representing BA research. Saudi

Arabia has historically practised strict segregation of the sexes in every aspect of daily life, including education, workplaces, restaurants, and social gatherings, deeply embedded in religious and cultural traditions (Le Renard 2014; Sian et al. 2020; Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024). The strict gender roles have affected many social and economic dimensions, work included, and women's role in it (Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024). However, the launch of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016 introduced gradual reforms aimed at increasing economic diversification and social inclusion, including improving the entertainment sector and expanding women's participation in sports (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024).

Specifically, gender equality and empowering women economically, socially, and culturally have been one of the main objectives of the Saudi Vision 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024). To encourage women's involvement in fields traditionally dominated by men, several initiatives and feminisation programs have been introduced, including the integration of sports into girls' school curricula (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024). In particular, women's participation in sports has gained substantial attention, leading to a recorded increase of over 150% (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024). For example, women were not allowed to attend professional football matches until 2018 (Duerden 2018), yet the Saudi women's national football team was created in 2022 (Duerden 2023), an incredible shift during this brief period. Likewise, Saudi women have made their debuts in various sports, including swimming, boxing, tennis, and fencing (Visit Saudi Arabia 2025; Saudi Vision 2030, 2024), which demonstrates the rapid development of Saudi women's sports. Despite all these deeper advancements, Saudi Arabia was ranked 131st of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023 (World Economic Forum 2023), highlighting ongoing challenges and debates.

However, such progressive changes, particularly in gender equality and women's participation in sports, still face social and cultural resistance because they challenge deep-rooted customs and beliefs. Traditionally, Saudi women are required to dress in a specific dress, typically wearing an abaya, a long cloak that covers the body (Visit Saudi Arabia 2025). Saudi Arabia passed the "Public Decency Law" in 2019, declaring what is appropriate public attire for women and men (Visit Saudi Arabia 2025). The law recommends loose-fitting clothing covering the elbows and ankles, reinforcing modesty as a religious and cultural expectation. While these dress codes originate from religious values emphasising modesty (Fam et al. 2004), cultural traditions have also influenced variations in women's attire, such as the preferred black colour of the abaya.

Because the majority of sports, such as swimming, football, and boxing, entail specialised athletic wear that may not adhere to Saudi traditional dressing standards, the participation of women in these sports has caused controversy among conservative segments of society. As a result, initiatives aimed at promoting women's engagement in public sports remain divisive, making this topic (i.e., gender equality in sports) highly relevant to this research.

Moreover, another key objective of Saudi Vision 2030 is the expansion of the tourism and entertainment industries, leading to the establishment of the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) in 2016 to regulate and promote the sector (General Entertainment Authority 2025). The GEA has introduced several notable and controversial changes by organising large-scale domestic and international events that challenge long-standing traditions. Notably, it has hosted music festivals, such as Soundstorm, which challenge traditional social norms, such as mixed gender audiences (Ebrahim 2022).

Music has traditionally been viewed as taboo for many Islamic scholars and conservative parts of Saudi society, resulting in its previous ban and prohibition in such public places (Ebrahim 2022). Even though music concerts have been held before, they tended to be restricted and gender-segregated. The launch of Western-style music festivals, with mixed-gender audiences, dancing, and diverse musical genres, is therefore a significant change in the events landscape. Events like the MDL Beast festival and concerts by international artists underscore the broader agenda of the Saudi government to rebrand the country as a global entertainment and tourist destination (MDLBEAST 2023).

These developments have provoked polarised reactions within Saudi society. Supporters view them as progress toward modernisation and cultural integration, aligning with Saudi Vision 2030 (Hothan and Butler 2024). Critics, however, argue that such events undermine deeply ingrained traditions and religious values, generating an ongoing debate about the balance between reform and cultural preservation (Hothan and Butler 2024). As Saudi Arabia undergoes this transformation, public discussion of entertainment, gender roles, and religious practice continues to shape public discourse. Such debate concerning Saudi hosting music festivals among its citizens serves to demonstrate the applicability of selecting such a theme for this thesis.

The third and final focal issue is LGBTQ+ rights. While gender equality and music festivals may be classified as local contentious issues, LGBTQ+ rights represent an internationally controversial issue. Nonetheless, due to the active involvement of numerous brands in supporting LGBTQ+ rights, the topic has become highly relevant to BA and widely debated across different audiences, including Saudis. This is reflected in its frequent adoption as a focal issue in BA research (e.g., Ahmad et al. 2022; Verlegh 2023; Xie et al. 2024). Although there's a chance that legal prohibition of LGBTQ+ practices in Saudi Arabia may restrain or limit public discussion about the issue, numerous Western brands publicly supporting LGBTQ+ rights have a presence within Saudi Arabia, which makes them controversial among Saudis who are greatly influenced by Western products and brands (Khatu 2025).

For instance, in May 2022, Muslim player Idrissa Gueye avoided a match due to not wanting to wear a rainbow-colored shirt advocating for LGBTQ+ rights (Morgan 2022). His move incited global controversies, with some arguing that his right to act according to his religion was correct, but others labelling it as discriminatory (Morgan 2022). The responses in Saudi Arabia were also in strong support of Gueye's stance, with supporters and Saudi clubs expressing approval through social media, praising him for holding on to his religious convictions and pushing back against Western cultural influences (see Figure 1).

Additionally, the official Saudi Tourism Authority website is explicit about welcoming LGBTQ+ travellers to the country (Visit Saudi Arabia 2025); hence, LGBTQ+ rights remain a relevant and current topic of discussion in Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, while Saudi women were once prohibited from driving, this legal restriction did not prevent Saudis from actively debating the issue before the ban was lifted (Black 2013). Likewise, abortion is illegal in many states of the USA. However, public debate still happens quite frequently, justifying its selection as a focal object in different BA studies (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). This indicates that even if the legal status of an issue may influence its debate, controversy over the issue still exists in its relevant setting and therefore makes it a potential research area.

Nonetheless, where the discussion of the controversial issues in the qualitative phase is affected by the interview dialogue, the quantitative phase examines specific controversial issues. To mitigate potential confounding effects of the legal status, the LGBTQ+ rights issue is included only in Study 1, which aims to establish the impact of BA among Saudis.

Conversely, gender equality is selected as the focal issue across Studies 2 and 4 to address concerns and limitations associated with LGBTQ+ rights. Finally, the topic of hosting large-scale music festivals is incorporated into Study 3 to replicate and validate findings from the gender equality study (Study 2).

**Figure 1:** Saudi Clubs' Support for Idrissa Gueye's position

**Source:** The author



### 3.5 Ethical Consideration

Throughout this research, careful attention was given to ethical considerations to ensure the well-being, confidentiality, and autonomy of participants. Several ethical principles were followed across all the research to reduce any potential threats to the research subjects and ensure a harmlessness process, such as voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality, disclosure of the research objectives, and procedure of data analysis and reporting (Bhattacherjee 2019). Ethical approval was obtained in line with Cardiff University guidelines (Appendix A & B), and all applicable procedures were followed to reduce any potential ethical risks. Participants for both qualitative and quantitative phases were provided with an extensive Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C & D) that notified them of the purpose, procedures, and rights involved in the study, including their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Informed consent (Appendix E & F) was also given before taking

part, so that individuals were well informed about the nature of the research and their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by safely keeping all data and using pseudonyms for participants in interviews. Personal identifiable information was not collected during the experiment phase to maintain the privacy of participants.

For the qualitative process, participants were offered to be interviewed either face-to-face or on Zoom and asked for their thoughts about BA. They were shown examples of BA interactions, such as ads or statements, and asked for their responses. Participants were informed beforehand about the general topics to be discussed, including gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, allowing them to decide whether they were comfortable participating. Before the beginning of each interview, they were also reminded that they had the right to refuse to answer a question and/or terminate the interview at any point. The researcher maintained a neutral position, providing no personal opinions to avoid prejudice, and used follow-up questions to maintain a natural progression of conversation. Audio recordings were used instead of video to facilitate participants' comfort levels as much as possible, and recordings were kept confidential and transcribed under pseudonyms.

For the quantitative stage, the respondents were not explicitly made aware that the study aimed to examine reactions to BA because prior knowledge could influence responses. Instead, respondents were told that the study examined how brand communications and activities influenced the consumers' behaviour and provided their informed consent before participation. The Participant Information Sheet was presented on the first page of the questionnaire, and participants had to click "Next" to proceed, indicating that they had read the information. On the second page, participants were presented with the consent form, which they had to agree to before starting the questionnaire. Since no names were collected, responses remained completely anonymous, with only basic demographic information recorded. In sum, careful measures were taken to ensure that participation was entirely voluntary, that ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process, and that data collection and storage adhered to confidentiality and anonymity standards.

### **3.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter establishes the philosophical grounding and methodology choices that guide this research. A post-positivist research philosophy was employed to enable the use of mixed methods and adaptive investigation of such dynamic social phenomena as BA in Saudi

Arabia. An exploratory sequential mixed methods design was used, beginning with qualitative interviews to create context-specific knowledge and followed by quantitative research to validate and elaborate on the results. Abductive reasoning was employed to enable a back-and-forth movement between data and theory. The chapter also justified the selection of three controversial topics, gender equality in sport, music festivals, and LGBTQ+ rights, as points of investigation. Lastly, rigorous ethical protocols were followed at all stages to ensure ethical practice and the protection of participants.

## Chapter 4

### Research Methodology - Qualitative Phase

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology adopted in the first phase of this mixed-methods research. It presents the rationale behind employing a qualitative approach to explore Saudi consumers' responses to IBA. Given the exploratory nature of the thesis and the limited understanding of BA within the Saudi context, a qualitative design was deemed appropriate to uncover rich insights into the underlying cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes shaping consumer reactions. The chapter details the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews, the development and piloting of the interview guide, the interview procedure, sampling strategies, and trustworthiness criteria. It also explains the method of data analysis, which followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. By documenting the qualitative procedures with transparency and rigour, this chapter sets the foundation for the development of the themes presented in the findings chapter.

#### 4.2 Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

Qualitative research, in contrast to quantitative methods, allows for the collection of data through open-ended questions rather than predetermined scales or questions (Creswell et al. 2018). This type of research yields various forms of information, such as textual data (i.e., words) or images. Given the focus of this study on consumers' perceptions and intentional behaviours toward IBA, it is crucial first to employ a qualitative method that facilitates in-depth conversations with participants to uncover nuanced patterns and generate rich textual data.

Therefore, employing semi-structured in-depth interviews aligns with the research criteria. This approach offers flexibility, allowing the interviewer to adapt or modify questions based on the interviewee's responses (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). This flexibility is particularly of paramount importance in this study context for two primary reasons. Firstly, because qualitative research on BA is limited (Cammarota et al. 2023), there is a need for qualitative methods that can grasp such rich information and exploration, which existing quantitative research may overlook. Second, since BA in Saudi Arabia is unexplored,

flexibility is crucial to capture diverse perceptions, particularly around religious and cultural values not addressed in existing literature.

Whereas one may argue that other qualitative approaches, such as focus groups, seem suitable for this study's methodology, it presents certain drawbacks. First, because this study focuses on individuals' perspectives and experiences, there is a high possibility that some participants' opinions and thoughts may be influenced or dominated by other participants (Frey and Fontana 1991). More importantly, given the sensitive topics discussed in this study, such as LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality, some participants may hesitate to express their true thoughts in a group setting if they contradict cultural or religious norms.

Another significant cultural factor pertains to the prescribed boundaries and limitations in interactions between men and women in Saudi society. These include norms like refraining from handshake greetings between genders (Nina 2019) and the expectation for women to modulate their voices when conversing in the presence of men (Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024). As evidence of this, the cultural context often leads many Saudis to prefer working in gender-segregated workplaces to mitigate potential breaches of social norms (e.g., Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024). Consequently, the requirement for a mixed-gender environment in a focus group setting may induce discomfort among some participants or potentially introduce sampling bias by recruiting more open-minded individuals and excluding more conservative ones. Comparably, a single-gender focus group setting may drive discussion biases, particularly concerning gender equality issues, as some participants may unconsciously feel compelled to conform to certain expectations. For instance, in an all-female group setting, some participants may express support for women's issues to align with societal expectations rather than reflecting their genuine opinions.

For these reasons, semi-structured in-depth interviews were deemed the most appropriate method, as they provide flexibility, ensure cultural sensitivity, and allow participants to share their views freely on sensitive issues.

### **4.3 Interview Guide Development**

The interview guide, serving as a set of questions driving the dialogue towards the research topic (Kallio et al. 2016), plays a pivotal role in ensuring quality data collection and analysis (Barriball and While 1994). Producing a well-designed interview guide is imperative for

comprehensive coverage of research aspects and maintaining consistency across interviews. Following Kallio et al.'s (2016) five-phase approach, a robust and reliable interview guide was developed, briefly described in Table 8.

The first phase of identifying prerequisites, which includes the evaluation of using semi-structured interviews, is explained in the previous section (i.e., see 4.2. Semi-structured In-depth Interviews). In the second phase, a thorough literature review of BA and related concepts (e.g., brand transgression) was undertaken to grasp the research topic and identify gaps. Besides consultations with academic experts in qualitative and BA research, the literature was the primary source for formulating interview questions. For example, studies show that religion significantly influences consumers' forgiveness of a brand's failure and recovery strategies (Hyodo and Bolton 2021), yet, to the researcher's best knowledge, no existing BA research has examined the impact of religion or cultural values on consumer responses. Thus, a gap was identified, and questions related to religious and cultural aspects were incorporated. The literature review chapter is indeed evidence of conducting this phase.

**Table 8:** Interview Guide Development (Kallio et al. 2016)

Phase	Description	Procedure
Identifying prerequisites	Evaluate the suitability of semi-structured interviews based on research questions and participant characteristics.	Semi-structured interviews were particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive topics (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality) without participants being influenced by group dynamics or breaching some cultural and religious norms.
Retrieving and using previous knowledge	Gather a comprehensive understanding of the subject through literature review and expert consultation.	Carried out an extensive critical review of BA/related concepts, cultural, and religious literatures to comprehend the subject, and complemented with consultations with academic experts in qualitative and BA research.

Formulating preliminary guide	Develop a flexible interview guide with open-ended questions to elicit in-depth responses.	Formulated clear, simple, open-ended, loose, and flexible questions, covering main themes and follow-up questions that are participant-oriented.
Pilot testing	Confirm the guide's relevance and identify adjustments through internal testing, expert assessment, and field-testing.	Conducted a pilot interview using the interview guide while observed by two qualitative expert researchers.
Presenting complete guide	Produce a clear, universal interview guide reflecting previous phases, suitable for data collection.	Finalised interview guide thoroughly reflecting the earlier phases to present a clear and logical interview guide.

The most crucial phase is formulating the preliminary guide, as it explains the logic behind selecting these questions. To begin, the interview guide was divided into several thematic sections (Table 9). In the first section, the aim was to warm up participants and establish a relaxed environment, as recommended by various studies (Kallio et al. 2016; Krauss et al. 2009). Thus, the questions focused on participants' personal views of brands and their reasons for liking or disliking them.

To continue warming up while preparing participants for the main sections, questions on related concepts, such as CSR, were included. The goal was to encourage participants to think about brand activities and efforts beyond products, particularly social contributions. These questions also provided a baseline understanding of views on brand social engagement, regardless of their controversial nature. For instance, a participant may oppose brand social contributions in general and thus reject an initiative regardless of the issue itself. Asking such questions helps solve this concern and ensures that agreement or disagreement is linked to the issue rather than the concept of social contribution per se.

Before proceeding to the BA main questions, a general question about the concept of activism was asked. The aim was to ease participants into the BA context and capture their understanding of activism, given the infrequency of activist activity in Saudi Arabia. The interview then moved to the main questions that explored Saudi consumers' perceptions, emotions, and intended behaviours toward brands engaging in controversial issues. Asking such questions before showing scenarios had two purposes: (1) to evaluate overall cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses to BA, and (2) to assess such responses independently

of participants' existing relationships with brands. This distinction is vital, as brand attachment can influence responses to BA (Haupt et al. 2023).

The interview then moved to real BA scenarios based on participants' questionnaire responses in the recruitment process (see 4.5 Recruitment Process and Sampling). Similar questions to those in the previous section were asked to compare and evaluate responses. These sections addressed RQ1 and used real-world examples to increase validity and reliability. Next, participants were asked about the genuineness of these brand initiatives, as authenticity is shown to influence BA responses (e.g., Vredenburg et al. 2020; Mirzaei et al. 2022; Papadopoulou et al. 2023).

Subsequently, questions relating to religious/cultural values and the perception of brand globalness or localness were posed. Based on the literature and theoretical foundations, these factors may shape Saudi consumers' responses (e.g., Waymer and VanSlette 2021; Davvetas et al. 2024; Shukla et al. 2024; Tsougkou et al. 2024). To capture them, a broad, non-leading question was asked: "What are the factors that influence your opinion on this issue?" Follow-up prompts were used where necessary, such as "Would your religion/cultural values impact your view on this issue?"

The interview concluded with an overview question asking participants about the most important factor they consider when evaluating a brand's stance, to encourage reflection on what Saudi consumers prioritise in the BA context. The questions and vocabulary were designed to be direct and straightforward, to facilitate engagement (Kallio et al. 2016). In addition, the guide served as a "navigation" rather than a "standard" tool, allowing flexibility in question order and enabling participants to raise unanticipated but relevant topics.

The fourth phase involved conducting a pilot test of the semi-structured interview guide to assess its effectiveness and identify necessary adjustments in question order, clarity, coverage, relevance, and ethical criteria. This pilot was conducted under the supervision of two experts in qualitative methods and BA, thereby enhancing research integrity and supporting the researcher's interviewing skills. Finally, in the last phase, the interview guide was finalised by reflecting on all previous steps to produce a clear, logical, and reliable tool for data collection. Appendix G provides the completed guide.

**Table 9:** Structure of The Interview Guide

Section	Example Questions	Aim / Rationale
Warm-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What are your favourite brands, and why?</li> <li>- What makes a brand attractive or unattractive?</li> <li>- What do you think of brands that have social contributions?</li> </ul>	Break the ice, focus on brand context, explore general views on CSR as a baseline.
Activism concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What comes to mind when you hear the word “activism”? Why?</li> <li>- Do you think activism is important? Why?</li> </ul>	Gauge understanding of activism, particularly relevant in Saudi Arabia, where activism is infrequent.
Main BA questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do you think of brands that support controversial issues?</li> <li>- What do you feel about such brands?</li> <li>- Would it affect your consumption? How and why?</li> </ul>	Explore cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses to BA.
Scenario-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is your impression of this brand stance?</li> <li>- What emotions did you feel?</li> <li>- How would you respond to the brand?</li> </ul>	Test responses to real BA scenarios; strengthen validity.
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To what extent do you trust this support?</li> <li>- What makes a brand stance realistic for you?</li> </ul>	Examine perceptions of authenticity in BA.
Religion / cultural values & global-local	- What factors influence your opinion on this issue? (follow-ups: role of religion, morality, brand localness/globalness).	Assess the role of religious, cultural, and global-local factors in shaping perceptions.
Closing	- After all this discussion, what is the most significant factor you consider when evaluating a brand's stance? Why?	Encourage reflection; identify the most salient decision factor.

#### 4.4 Interview Procedure

The interviews adopted an in-depth semi-structured interview structure, ranging from approximately 42 to 82 minutes, depending on the participants' engagement and desires to talk. Table 10 shows a brief description of the interview research process timeline. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom software. However, the participants were offered the option to conduct the interview face-to-face or online. This option was given for several reasons. The interaction between genders in Saudi Arabia is avoidable due to cultural norms (Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024). These cultural norms are also extended to meeting with the opposite gender in public places (e.g., coffee shops), especially for Saudi citizens. It is not

expected for Saudi men or women, for example, to hang out with the opposite gender for fun or pleasurable conversations, etc. Thus, as a male researcher, it was challenging to recruit female participants or conduct the interview in public with female participants. Previous studies provide evidence that some Saudi researchers prefer using quantitative methods (e.g., questionnaires) over qualitative ones to attain a diverse range of participants (e.g., Ajina et al. 2019). With online interviews, participants' identities and appearances can be absent (depending on the participants' desires), allowing for the reach of such diverse participants (55% female participants). Therefore, running the interviews online can break these cultural challenges as the participants can interview in their preferred settings. Consequently, all interviewees preferred holding online interviews through Zoom software.

After receiving and completing their consent forms (Appendix E), participants were contacted (via WhatsApp or email) to arrange a day and time for the interview, based on their own availability and preferences. On the day of the interview, all participants were asked again about their consent at the beginning of the interview and reminded that pseudonyms would be utilised to encourage engaging conversations and ensure the ethical application process (Guenther 2009). All interviews were audio recorded (with participants' agreements) via Zoom audio recording software for validity and reliability purposes. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked and asked if they desired to share the recruitment link with others. All audio recordings were transcribed through the Word Office feature "Dictate," which allowed for transcriptions in the Arabic language. These transcripts were uploaded into NVivo software to manage and organise the data effectively. It is also used for manual analysis and organising the codes and themes (see Appendix H).

**Table 10:** Interview Research Process Timeline

Stage	Date	Activity
Ethical Approval	May 2023	Received ethical approval to conduct the interviews.
Interview phase	June-August 2023	Conducted a total of 22 interviews (12 female, 10 male) on Saudi consumers' response to BA.

Transcription	August - September 2023	Transcribed interview recordings.
Data preparation	October 2023	Uploaded transcripts into NVivo software for data organisation and management to produce more effective analysis.
Analysis phase	October – February 2024	Initiated manual analysis phase, employing thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns and themes.

## 4.5 Recruitment Process and Sampling

### 4.5.1 Recruitment Process

In qualitative research, researchers should be flexible when making decisions, as qualitative methods are characterised by their evolving design throughout the methodology process (Negrin et al. 2022). This should also be reflected in the strategy followed to recruit the research participants. A combination of recruitment sampling strategies was adopted: (1) a purposive sampling strategy and (2) a snowballing sampling strategy. The purposive sampling strategy involves the subjective selection by the researcher of those who experience the phenomena under study or key elements of it (Creswell et al. 2018). This strategy aims to identify participants who can provide rich information about the study's phenomena (i.e., BA) rather than those who may not be aware of it or feel indifferent toward it. This subjective process is recommended in qualitative recruitment as random sampling may result in recruiting uninformative participants (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Thus, subjective sampling criteria were developed to enhance the probability of recruiting interested and informed participants.

The first criterion was that participants should be familiar with and consumers of the selected brands. This criterion allows for the imitation of real-life scenarios and answers rather than fictitious or unrealistic responses. To clarify, being a consumer of the brand would stimulate actual responses as the participant would be challenged. Hence, they are more likely to express their actual intentions. On the other hand, if the participants were not customers of the brand, their answers may become optimal as they are not adequately challenged. However, 12 well-known brands in various industries were selected to be diverse and avoid potential group biases (e.g., Nike, Sephora, Starbucks, the Saudi airline Flyadeal).

The second main criterion was the participants' awareness of brands engaging in controversial issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality. It is crucial that participants are familiar with the topic so that they can share their perspectives and be more rational since they have thought about it. In comparison, those who are unaware of the topic may provide more emotional answers in response. Issues (i.e., LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality) which are present in current media are selected so that they become relevant and also expand the inclusion sampling criteria to the most significant possible number. The last criterion was whether the participants had previously engaged with brands' stances on controversial issues. The participants' engagements ought to reflect their awareness and interests in the issues, which again enhances the quality of the collected data and the knowledge of the Saudi customers' perspectives. However, to broaden this sampling criterion, the engagement included participants' participation in social media contexts (e.g., replies, likes, comments) or even in real-life conversations with family, friends, etc. All these criteria were meant to enhance the data collection and quality.

To reach these participants, a concise questionnaire was designed to assess the three criteria. The questionnaire contains questions about (1) participants' consumption, (2) awareness of brands engaging on controversial issues, (3a) their engagement, (3b) and how they engage (see Appendix I). Also, at the end of the questionnaire, contact details (WhatsApp number or email) were requested if they consented to being interviewed. A link that contains the details of the research and other ethical information (e.g., participant information sheet; Appendix C) was also provided. Therefore, based on the participants' answers, those who met the sampling criteria and consented to participate were contacted.

The sampling questionnaire, which is the primary method for recruiting participants, was distributed through personal networks and WhatsApp communities (e.g., Saudis living abroad, Saudis seeking a PhD admission, Saudis living in Cardiff). For example, four of the WhatsApp communities to which the sampling questionnaire has been sent together encompass a total of over 1200 members, which enhances the potential participant diversity reach. A total of 67 responses were received from the sampling questionnaire; however, only 22 participants met all the criteria and consented to conduct the interview. Also, all participants at the end of the interview were asked to promote the sampling questionnaire to those they thought would be interested (snowballing sampling strategy) to exploit participants' social connections and to attain a wider variety of participants. While the

snowballing sampling strategy may prompt such biases, like contacting only specific groups or close ones (Creswell 2014), the sampling questionnaire aimed to mitigate these challenges via its criteria sampling.

#### **4.5.2 Sampling Size**

In qualitative research, researchers often avoid constraining the sample size before the beginning of the study (Creswell et al. 2018). Following this aspect, there was no definitive size of the sample. Interviews were conducted until no new information on the topic was being obtained. This concept is defined as “saturation”, where a researcher attains the desired understanding, and that new data does not add further insights or knowledge into the research topic (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). According to Lewis-Beck et al. (2004), saturation is typically reached through two primary concepts: sampling appropriateness and adequacy.

Sampling appropriateness involves the suitability of the selected participants. When the sample is appropriate, it is expected that a researcher can achieve a saturation level by following a purposeful sampling strategy where s/he can ensure the quality of the interviewee (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). In the previous section (Recruitment Process), details were provided on how the sampling criteria were used to help reach an appropriate sample. Sampling adequacy, on the other hand, refers to “enough data” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004, p. 996), that is, when data is replicated across the interviews or other means, such as literature. However, the data can come in different forms, such as reporting different experiences that reflect similar points (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Therefore, the interviews were conducted until the point of saturation was reached, where similar answers were repeated (i.e., adequacy).

This resulted in a sample of 22 interviews, 12 female and 10 male participants. The number of participants is considered suitable by many researchers (Creswell 2014; Creswell and Clark 2018; Bryman et al. 2022). Table 11 shows a description of the interview participants.

**Table 11:** Description of The Interview Participants

<b>ID</b>	<b>Pseudonym Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Interview Time</b>
1	Farah	25	Female	01:02:00
2	Areej	22	Female	00:58:35
3	Maram	29	Female	00:55:54
4	Lenna	19	Female	00:51:32
5	Buthaina	40	Female	01:06:44
6	Haya	31	Female	00:59:25
7	Sami	33	Male	01:21:33
8	Lama	31	Female	00:52:18
9	Ahmed	35	Male	00:47:37
10	Mohamad	34	Male	01:04:36
11	Osama	31	Male	01:04:11
12	Anas	37	Male	01:07:22
13	Ziad	44	Male	00:51:28
14	Amal	37	Female	00:49:46
15	Mohannad	36	Male	00:44:43
16	Fares	34	Male	00:55:35
17	Sara	33	Female	00:55:45
18	Nasser	30	Male	00:54:27
19	Yasser	29	Male	01:09:06
20	Wateen	49	Female	00:41:11
21	Banan	22	Female	01:04:04
22	Shaden	29	Female	00:44:39

#### 4.6 Research Method of Analysing Qualitative Data

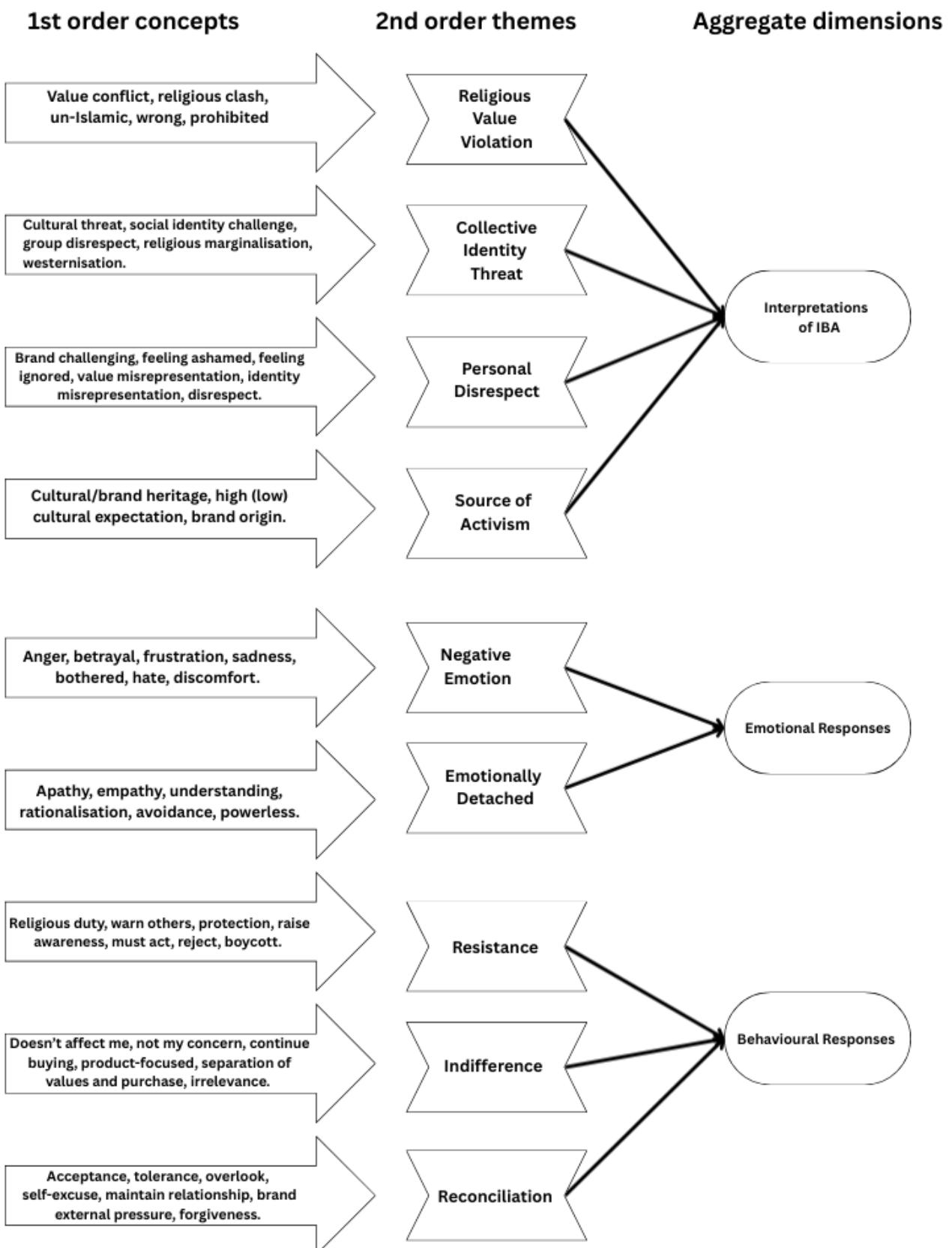
This section provides an overview of the methodological framework used to analyse data from 22 semi-structured interviews. Effectively managing the data and conducting a systematic analysis requires selecting an appropriate analytical method aligned with the research objectives. For data organisation and management, NVivo software was utilised. This software offers tools for coding and categorising data, thereby enhancing systematic organisation and ensuring a consistent structure (see Appendix H). However, the actual analysis was conducted independently of NVivo, allowing for deeper engagement with the

data and the identification of nuanced insights. Figure 2 presents the coding map from this qualitative phase, following the methodology outlined by Gioia et al. (2013).

Thematic analysis was employed for the analysis of the interview data. This approach involves identifying, analysing, and reporting repeated patterns or themes within the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006). Its purpose is to describe and interpret shared meanings related to thoughts, feelings, or behaviours (Kiger and Varpio 2020). Researchers typically choose thematic analysis when exploring a phenomenon that is not well understood (Hawkins 2018). Since BA is still in its infancy and previous studies have not examined it in the context of Saudi Arabia (to the best of my knowledge), thematic analysis is deemed an appropriate method for this research.

Moreover, thematic analysis is characterised by its flexibility, accommodating various theoretical and epistemological frameworks, as well as different research questions, designs, and sample sizes (Kiger and Varpio 2020). Given that a post-positivist epistemology underpins this research, it is essential that the analytical method retains the flexibility to navigate between objectivity and subjectivity. Consequently, the six well-known phases of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed.

**Figure 2: Qualitative Phase Coding Map**



#### **4.6.1 Data Familiarisation (Phase 1)**

Familiarising oneself with the data is a common practice in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke 2006). Researchers are expected to engage and immerse themselves in the data so that they become aware of the depth and breadth of the data (Creswell et al. 2018). The process of familiarisation began with the interviews, which involved interactive engagement with the participants, resulting in prior knowledge and analytical thoughts. This familiarisation stage continued during the audio file transcription process. By listening to each audio recorded at least twice, the quality of the transcription process was improved, and notes were taken on initial impressions, recurring topics, and analytical observations. For the first time, the Word Office feature “Dictate” was used, which allowed for the transcription of Arabic. The review of the transcripts occurred a second time after translating them into English. Although these steps were time-consuming, they were essential for immersing in the data and achieving a thorough familiarity with it. After the transcription and translation process, repeated and active reading was conducted, which involved reading while searching for meanings and patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). While reading, notes were made to generate ideas and prepare for the actual coding process.

#### **4.6.2 Generating Initial Codes (Phase 2)**

This phase involves the process of producing initial codes from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). According to Boyatzis (1998, p. 63), code is defined as an “... element of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon.” Given this definition, it is crucial that each code is clearly defined to avoid overlap with other codes. Therefore, the labels for the codes were primarily determined by examining the data in relation to the research questions. For example, since the first research question focuses on Saudi consumers’ perception of IBA, initial codes reflecting participants’ interpretations of IBA were generated, including codes such as religious clash, prohibited, cultural threat, identity misrepresentation, disrespect, and high (vs low) cultural expectations. This process allowed for a systematic approach to identifying codes throughout the entire dataset. In essence, it utilises an inductive reasoning strategy by constructing codes based on the data itself. In inductive reasoning, researchers investigate all recurring themes within the data as long as they align with the research objectives (Hawkins 2018). Consequently, in generating the initial codes, the logic of creating these codes involved assessing their relevance to the studied phenomena and research objectives.

#### **4.6.3 Searching, Reviewing, and Defining Themes (Phase 3-5)**

Following the process of generating codes, researchers engage in identifying, combining, and analysing these codes in relation to one another in order to formulate themes (Kiger and Varpio 2020). A theme has been defined as a distinct pattern of significance found within a dataset, influenced by the initial research questions (Breakwell et al. 2020, p. 290). After codes were developed, themes and sub-themes were identified by combining and connecting related codes that collectively described significant patterns. At this stage, initial thematic maps were created to visually represent and connect themes and sub-themes across the dataset, as shown in Appendix J (Braun and Clarke 2006). Given the exploratory nature of the study, themes were identified at the searching stage regardless of whether they appeared directly related to the research questions (Kiger and Varpio 2020).

Once initial themes were generated, a review process was undertaken to determine their relevance and coherence. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as a two-level analytical process. The first level involves evaluating the coded data within each theme to assess its appropriateness, coherence, and the sufficiency of supporting evidence. This step ensures that the coded data consistently and collectively represent the integrity of the theme, with adjustments such as adding, removing, dividing, or combining elements often necessary. The second level involves evaluating the themes in relation to the entire dataset, assessing how the thematic map represents and demonstrates the relationships between themes across the dataset as a whole. At this stage, researchers may revisit the data and generate additional codes to refine newly identified or modified themes (Kiger and Varpio 2020).

Following the review process, themes were defined and described, involving the articulation of why each theme is essential and how it relates to the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). This stage prepares for reporting by determining the key characteristics and underlying narrative of each theme, supported with illustrative examples from the data. It is important to note that the analytic process was not linear but iterative, requiring a return to earlier stages as new themes emerged (Braun and Clarke 2006).

#### **4.6.4 Reporting (Phase 6)**

The final phase covers the process of writing up the final analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). It aims to articulate the story and meanings of the data in a convincing and valid manner. At this phase, it is crucial that the writing-up contains data extracts that are coherent, logical, and

interesting to reflect on the story of the data. Since this phase is the way to provide such evidence of each theme, the selected extracts should be easily identified and embedded within the analytic narrative that explains the story behind the data. Therefore, reporting the findings should not be a mere description of these extracts, but rather be argumentative (Braun and Clarke 2006).

## **4.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour in Research**

To produce such high-quality research, researchers follow different quality criteria for evaluations. However, the process of assessment differs between quantitative methods and qualitative ones. In quantitative research, reliability, replication, and validity are often applied to evaluate the quality of research (Clark et al. 2021). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduce a new term, trustworthiness, when assessing the research quality criteria in qualitative research. The main reason for this new term is that it does not assume an objective social reality (positivist) but instead adopts the idea of multiple realities (interpretivist) (Clark et al. 2021). Accordingly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four main components of trustworthiness as follows: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability. The four criteria are empirically proven to facilitate credible and reliable research outcomes (Enworo 2023). Hence, the application of these four criteria in this research is elaborated below.

### **4.7.1 Credibility**

Credibility refers to the degree of confidence that research findings accurately represent participants' perspectives and experiences (Enworo 2023). It aligns with the concept of internal validity by addressing the trustworthiness of the findings (Hanson et al. 2019; Clark et al. 2021). Several steps were undertaken to enhance the credibility of this research. First, robust interview questions were developed through careful examination of the interview guide and pilot testing (see 4.3 Interview Guide Development) (Hanson et al. 2019). In addition, the recruitment process ensured the inclusion of experienced participants, specifically those previously engaged in a BA context, thereby enriching the conversational dynamic and depth of data collection (see 4.5.1 Recruitment Process).

Another strategy to enhance credibility is prolonged engagement (Clark et al. 2021), which refers to the researcher's deep involvement with participants and the research context (Stahl and King 2020). Sharing the same nationality and religious background as participants

provided cultural and religious awareness of the challenges they may face in the context of IBA. This common ground facilitated deeper engagement and enabled more meaningful conversations, such as discussions that referenced Quranic verses when these contradicted the brand's stance. Such cultural and religious familiarity further supported the interpretation of participants' perspectives.

Credibility was also strengthened through member checking, which involves consultation with informed researchers to verify interpretations of participants' views (Hanson et al. 2019). In this study, data interpretations were regularly discussed with the supervisory team to ensure accuracy and minimise bias. Furthermore, triangulation was applied to enhance credibility, drawing on multiple sources and methods to identify consistent patterns (Stahl and King 2020). For example, theoretical triangulation was employed by immersing in related literatures, including brand transgression, brand forgiveness, religiosity, and CSR, to inform and support data interpretation. Additionally, the adoption of a mixed-method design allowed the qualitative findings to be tested through a subsequent quantitative experiment, where hypotheses were derived directly from the qualitative phase. Finally, credibility was enriched through providing a thick description of the phenomenon (i.e., BA) and its context (i.e., Saudi Arabia). Such detailed contextualisation enables readers to evaluate the transferability of findings to other settings (Hanson et al. 2019).

#### **4.7.2 Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be applied or adapted to other contexts (Enworo 2023). While generalisation and replication are not the primary aims of qualitative research, which instead seeks depth rather than breadth of understanding, transferability highlights the potential for systematic qualitative insights to inform similar contexts (Stahl and King 2020). This thesis provides a thick description of the research problem, methodology, and context, which facilitates the possibility of other researchers applying or replicating the study (Stahl and King 2020; Clark et al. 2021). For instance, the contextual detail offered enables researchers to recognise the study setting (i.e., Saudi Arabia) and explore similar phenomena in comparable contexts, such as BA in other Muslim-majority countries or among Muslim consumers in non-Muslim societies. Likewise, the thick description of the research method, including the interview guide development and recruitment process, provides transparency that may inform the design of future studies. Researchers may, for example, adopt the sampling criteria or adapt the interview questions to

fit their contexts. Overall, the thick description and methodological transparency presented in this study enhance its transferability, offering a foundation for future research in culturally or religiously comparable settings.

#### **4.7.3 Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability refers to the extent to which research findings can be trusted, similar to the notion of credibility (Enworo 2023). While qualitative research cannot be exactly reproduced, the process should remain logical, transparent, and auditable. Maintaining an audit trail throughout all phases of the study enhances dependability by allowing the research process to be traced (Clark et al. 2021). In this study, interview transcripts and related data were systematically stored and managed using NVivo and Excel, ensuring that records were easily retrievable when necessary. This was particularly important given the extended time frame of doctoral research. Dependability was further supported through peer debriefing with the supervisory team, which provided opportunities to reflect on interpretations, challenge assumptions, and ensure the coherence of analytical decisions.

Confirmability concerns the degree to which research findings reflect participants' views rather than researcher bias or imagination (Hanson et al. 2019). While subjectivity is an acknowledged element of qualitative research, researchers must remain vigilant in preventing personal values or theoretical preferences from unduly shaping interpretations (Clark et al. 2021). To ensure confirmability, strategies such as triangulation were employed across various stages of analysis, including the comparison of findings with existing theories. Furthermore, transparency was enhanced by reporting the accurate participant quotations that informed the generation of themes (see Chapter 5), thereby demonstrating the direct link between data and interpretation.

### **4.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has described the methodological procedures used in the qualitative phase of the research. A semi-structured interview design was selected for its flexibility and depth, particularly suitable for investigating personal and context-sensitive topics such as religion and gender in Saudi society. The interview guide was carefully developed and refined through pilot testing and expert input, ensuring both cultural sensitivity and analytical relevance. Twenty-two interviews were conducted with participants selected through

purposive and snowball sampling, guided by clearly defined criteria related to brand familiarity, awareness of controversial brand stances, and prior engagement with such stances.

To ensure credibility and rigour, the chapter outlined the procedures for ethical data collection, transcription, and analysis. Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies, including member checking, theoretical triangulation, and thick description. The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach, enabling the systematic generation of codes and themes aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. The next chapter presents the qualitative findings, structured around the themes developed through this analytical process.

# Chapter 5

## Findings - Qualitative Phase

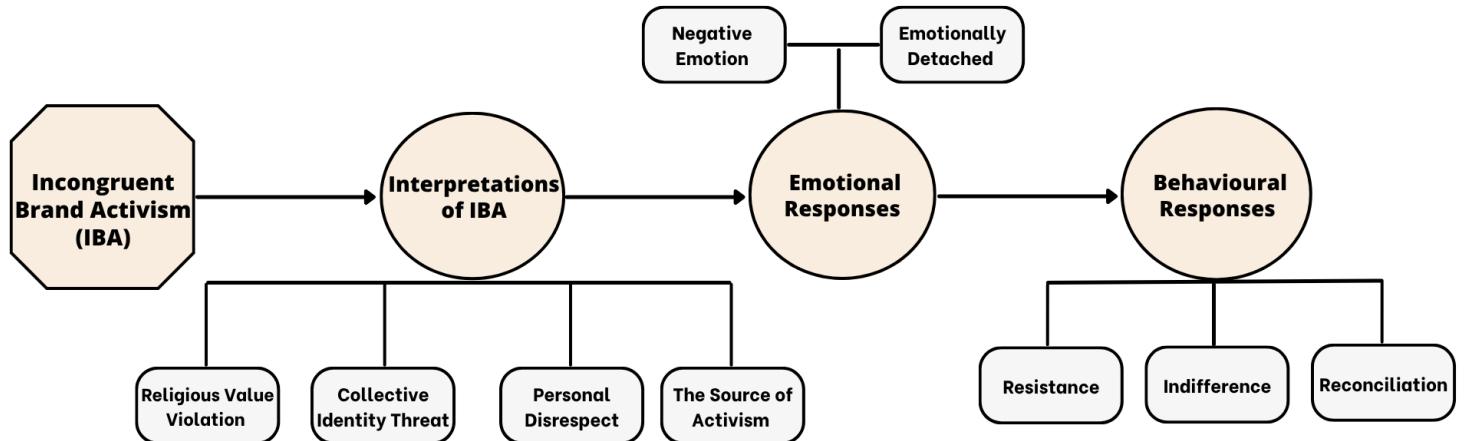
### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the qualitative findings generated from in-depth interviews with 22 Saudi consumers, exploring their interpretations and responses to IBA. The aim is to understand how consumers in a religious and conservative society interpret BA that conflicts with their cultural or religious norms, how they emotionally experience this dissonance, and how they respond. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns across participants' narratives, which informed the construction of the conceptual model tested in the quantitative phase.

The findings are organised under three overarching themes (see Figure 3), each of which captures a distinct stage in consumers' meaning-making and behavioural process. The first theme is Interpretations of IBA, which explores how consumers make sense of a brand's activist stance through four interpretive lenses: religious value violation, collective identity threat, personal disrespect, and source of activism. Second, Emotional Responses, which detail the emotional reactions elicited by these interpretations, ranging from intense negative emotions (e.g., anger, betrayal, disgust) to emotionally detached states (e.g., resignation, tolerance, or pragmatic indifference). Third, Behavioural Responses, which capture the behavioural outcomes of these interpretations and emotions, including resistance (e.g., boycotting out of religious obligation), reconciliation (e.g., forgiveness), and indifference (e.g., continued use without strong emotional involvement).

These three themes reflect the sequential and layered process through which Saudi consumers evaluate and respond to IBA: from interpreting the brand's stance, to experiencing emotional reactions, to engaging in different forms of behavioural responses. Importantly, the qualitative insights offered here not only deepen our understanding of consumer behaviour in a religious context but also form the conceptual basis for the subsequent experimental studies, where the constructs of RVI, SIT, self-dignity, and coping strategies (e.g., ROD and forgiveness coping) are empirically tested.

**Figure 3:** Thematic Map of Customers' Response to IBA.



## 5.2 Theme One: Interpretations of Incongruent Brand Activism

This theme explores how Saudi consumers make sense of BA that contradicts their religious or cultural values. Based on inductive analysis of the interview data, it became evident that participants did not interpret IBA in uniform or straightforward terms. Instead, they drew upon deeply embedded religious, social, and personal frameworks to construct meaning around the brand's stance.

In this study, interpretation refers to the narrative, value-laden lens through which consumers assess whether and how a brand's activism poses a problem (Spiggle 1994). This aligns with the work of Thompson and Haytko (1997), who conceptualise consumer interpretation as an active process of deriving meaning from marketplace messages based on personal, social, and cultural positioning. As Spiggle (1994, p. 498) explains, interpretation involves "making sense of experience and behaviour and seeing or understanding some phenomenon in its own terms." It includes assessing intentions, construing meanings, and grasping the essence of a phenomenon, particularly in how consumers frame and morally position events in relation to their own worldview.

These interpretations, therefore, are not yet formal cognitive appraisals of personal impact (as discussed in Chapter 6) but rather represent the first-order meaning structures that help consumers categorise, position, and morally frame IBA in relation to their worldview (Spiggle 1994).

From this inductive analysis, four interrelated interpretive sub-themes emerged: 1) Religious Value Violation, in which activism is seen as conflicting with Islamic teachings; 2) Collective Identity Threat, where activism is framed as an attack on the social or national identity of consumers; 3) Personal Disrespect, where the brand's stance is perceived as dismissive or insulting to one's personal dignity and values. The fourth dimension is 4) The Source of Activism, where the brand's origin, identity, or perceived cultural authority shapes the perceived appropriateness of its activist messaging.

Collectively, these interpretations offer a rich and contextualised understanding of how IBA is interpreted by Saudi consumers. Importantly, they provide the foundation for more formalised psychological processes, namely, the cognitive appraisals that are theorised and tested in Chapters 6 and 8 (e.g., RVI, SIT, and self-dignity). This approach also aligns with the TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), which suggests that before individuals evaluate how an issue affects their well-being (cognitive appraisal), they must first interpret what the situation is and whether it poses any threat or conflict. Although TTSC was not used to generate these themes, it provides a valuable framework for understanding how consumers move from interpretation to appraisal, then emotion, and finally to coping or behavioural response.

In sum, this theme highlights that Saudi consumers do not respond to IBA simply because it contradicts their values in the abstract. Rather, they interpret the brand's activism through deeply contextualised frameworks of meanings (e.g., religious, communal, and personal) that shape the emotional and behavioural responses that follow.

### **5.2.1 Sub-Theme 1: Religious Value Violation**

Religious value violation reflects how consumers interpret a brand's activist stance as conflicting with Islamic teachings. Specifically, Saudi customers' interpretation of IBA centres on whether a brand's message or behaviour violates sacred norms or promotes what is deemed haram (forbidden). When consumers perceive such a contradiction, they experience strong emotional responses such as discomfort, anger, or disappointment, which often guide their subsequent behaviour.

Thus, the interview data show that Saudi customers' reactions to IBA are shaped by the degree of alignment between the brand's actions and their deeply held Islamic beliefs.

Specifically, a brand's stance on controversial issues is scrutinised through the lens of religious values, especially when these stances involve sensitive topics like gender roles, LGBTQ+ rights, or public displays of behaviours that contradict Islamic norms. For example, some participants strongly opposed the portrayal of Saudi women in non-traditional roles, such as pilot or flight attendant, as it conflicts with their perceptions of the Islamic view of modesty and gender separation. As they noted:

*"This is the co-mingling of sexes, taking the woman out of the respect and the value that Islam has given her by making her wear a veil... She serves men on the plane, in a narrow place, etc. All of this is humiliating for women. That's why I'm against it because it contradicts religion very clearly." (Osama, male, 31)*

*"Now I see a lot of these things as like this, like Saudi women going out without an abaya or a headscarf. And they are still respected, I mean there's nothing wrong with them. But I doubt if their religious conscience is strong or not, because this is clear and explicit in religion, that women should cover themselves, and wear something not tight on their bodies and so on."*  
(Areej, Female, 22)

*"It's clear that the appearance of women, which is the appearance of their hair and so on, whether partially covered or not covered, this is something rejected, so of course, I reject it, as I told you and mentioned at the beginning, the Islamic framework that governs me, so I refuse or agree accordingly. If you ask me again, whether I agree or disagree, yes, I definitely reject the way women appear like this." (Nasser, male, 30)*

In these quotes, the participants interpret the role of women in society based on religious doctrines regarding modesty and gender role. The perception that women working in close quarters with men on an aeroplane violates Islamic boundaries that encourage the separation of men and women in workplaces, triggering a strong sense of religious violation. The dilemma resulting from this incongruence prompts negative emotional responses, such as frustration or indignation, as participants feel that the brand is not respecting their religious values.

Also, such stances reflect a perception that certain brands may promote ideologies and behaviours that disrespect or violate Islamic principles. These participants see such

representations as not only inappropriate but as direct attacks on their religious values.

Another example that illustrates how Saudi customers heavily interpret IBA through the lens of religious values is their firm rejection of brands that support the LGBTQ+ community, a clear point of religious violation:

*"Supporting homosexuals in Islam is, of course, very prohibited because it [i.e., Islam] prohibits the assistance to this great obscenity, or even contributing to its spread, or supporting them financially or spiritually. Because it is against nature, you know."* (Lenna, Female, 19)

*"It contradicts our Islamic beliefs. It contradicts us; Islam mentions male and female. It's not up to anyone to decide their own rules; it's not allowed to go against the natural instinct... I had some product in mind that I was excited to try, but after this post [showing support for LGBTQ+ rights], I cancelled the idea and bought from another brand."* (Shaden, female, 29)

Through these interpretations, customers evaluate whether a brand's activism aligns with or opposes their religious beliefs, and this informs their decisions on whether to engage or disengage with the brand. Even when they perceive, for example, women's empowerment movements as generally positive, they may reject them if they perceive a violation of Islamic customs or cultural norms. As an example, one respondent reflected on women's empowerment ads that failed to represent Islamic and Saudi ideals of modesty:

*"I remember that on the National Day, they made videos, apparently for Pizza Maestro [a Saudi brand], it was all ladies who were supposed to be Saudi, not their hijab like Saudis, not their appearance, not their look, and we are supposed to be convinced that you are working towards Saudi women empowerment."* (Buthaina, Female, 40)

Similarly, despite his agreement with women's empowerment as a topic, a father shared his feeling of distress about promoting ads showing non-veil Muslim women, as it may affect his way of educating his children to follow the Islamic teachings, as he said:

*"Although empowerment is good, there are some things I don't want to see it as a religious veil... I still don't want anything to offend my religion or anything. Once I saw a woman who was unveiled, and it is forbidden by my religion to do so. I have children, and I'm trying to*

*teach them that they have to wear the veil. But what can I do if their father shows them a picture of a woman who is not wearing it? (Anas, male, 37, Master's)*

Therefore, the sub-theme of religious value violation evidently reflects how Saudi customers primarily interpret the brand's stance based on its perceived harmony or conflict with their religious values. When they identify such incongruence, consumers may start appraising how the IBA affects their value system, leading to potential disengagement from the brand or expressing their disapproval, driven by their commitment to upholding Islamic principles. This interpretation plays a significant role in determining their cognitive appraisals and coping responses to the brand's stance.

It is evident from these discussions and quotes that further examination of the impact of religious values on Saudi customers' coping strategies and behavioural outcomes is needed. Hence, this interpretive lens later served as the foundation for the RVI construct examined in the quantitative phase (see Chapter 6).

### **5.2.2 Sub-Theme 2: Collective Identity Threat**

This sub-theme reflects consumers' interpretation of IBA as a threat to the collective moral order, particularly in its influence on family life, religious boundaries, and national values. Collective identity threat arises when consumers perceive the IBA as an explicit challenge to their shared identity, values, and religious or cultural beliefs. This interpretation often induces a strong emotional reaction since it signals a possible disruption not only to personal beliefs but to society's moral fabric. For many respondents, IBA is not considered just ideological but also intrusive, particularly when it overlaps with issues like family life and child raising. This fear is expressed in the following quotations:

*"I started to worry that even in their content for children, there might be things [i.e., LGBTQ+ content]... because when you play something for a child, you don't know what he's watching." (Mohamad, male, 34)*

*"When I'm with my children and I want to buy from this brand, my children see me going towards this brand, and they see that it supports this issue [i.e., LGBTQ+]. It raises questions in their minds about whether this is right." (Mohannad, male, 36)*

These reflections highlight that the collective identity threat goes beyond symbolic disagreement. The IBA is perceived as a symbolic and moral invasion into the family domain, causing anxiety regarding its possible impact on future generations. The fear that children may absorb messages which are religiously or culturally unsuitable intensifies the emotional significance of the brand's stance. Consumers react not only to incongruence in values but also to a perceived loss of control over the ideological environment to which their families are exposed.

This sense of threat is not limited to the family context but also extends to a broader social landscape. Some participants saw brands as attempting to reshape Saudi Arabia's cultural fabric, seeing their activism as an attempt to change public perception:

*"But if you tell me that Starbucks supports the LGBTQ community in Saudi Arabia, this makes a significant difference for me. Here they are trying to change the mentality in Saudi Arabia, but in their communities, their communities are destroyed."* (Osama, male, 31)

*"No, I am not affected. They [i.e., brands] are free, in the end. I understand that I accept the differences, I know that there are people whose priority is freedom and all that, but what I may not accept is if they [i.e., brands] approach an Arab or Muslim."* (Sara, female, 33)

*"I start tweeting about this subject, this company, for example, supports or spreads wrong and negative ideas, so I deny them, I try to resist this thing... This is the only way possible to show people, or to raise their awareness in general."* (Banan, female, 22)

These interpretations elevate the brand's actions from a mere activism to ideological agenda-setting, provoking stronger emotional responses due to the perceived erosion of cultural identity. Such narratives frame the brand not just as a commercial organisation, but as an ideological actor, described as attempting to impose foreign values or disrupt local cultural stability. For many, activism is viewed not as a neutral act but as a symbolic threat to society's moral and religious integrity.

What makes this analysis particularly insightful is how emotional responses, such as resentment, resignation, and a sense of threat, occur simultaneously. For instance, consumers may feel morally outraged by a brand's stance (i.e., resentment) yet face practical limitations,

such as a lack of alternatives, that compel them to continue engaging with that brand (i.e., resignation). The following quote adequately describes this emotional tension:

*"My feeling is that I categorically reject it [i.e., LGBTQ+], but we also cannot do without it [i.e., foreign brands]. It has become necessary; we have to deal with it [i.e., foreign brands], we have to buy from it. It has become a necessity. I cannot boycott them, I cannot. But I reject it." (Lama, female, 31).*

This statement reveals an interactive emotional process by which resentment (moral rejection) is intertwined with resignation (helpless continuation), potentially amplifying the overall sense of threat to collective identity. In summary, the concept of collective identity threat serves as a critical interpretive framework through which Saudi consumers understand IBA. This interpretation informs heightened emotional responses and contributes to the SIT construct tested in the quantitative phase of the study.

### **5.2.3 Sub-Theme 3: Personal Disrespect**

This sub-theme captures how consumers interpret specific activist messages as personally disrespectful or misaligned with their individual sense of moral self-worth. Unlike collective interpretations, this lens centres on personal affront, how IBA makes the consumer feel dismissed, unseen, or morally violated as an individual. This sub-theme, therefore, refers to the extent to which consumers feel their personal and moral integrity is challenged or undermined by the brand's activism.

Many participants reported feelings of embarrassment, shame, or even humiliation upon being confronted with BA, which they found to conflict with their religious and cultural values. Such internal dissonance usually generates emotional withdrawal, moral rejection, or even a complete breakdown of the consumer-brand relationship. As one participant explained:

*"I never buy from that brand, even though they have really good things. But they always like, you know, it [i.e., Huda Beauty] always likes to bring up controversial issues... I know that Islam rejects this [i.e., LGBTQ+], so why are you trying to represent Muslims and support them at the same time? Unfortunately, this makes me want to boycott them rather than support or sympathise with them." (Buthaina, Female, 40)*

Here, the customer also experiences moral betrayal, not just due to the stance taken by the brand, but because the brand (or its founder) is recognised as belonging to the same religious in-group. Because the brand is seen to represent Muslim identity while violating Islamic norms, the conflict is internalised as a personal disrespect, undermining the participant's self-concept and dignity, intensifying the emotional rejection. Other participants felt disrespected when brands misrepresented Saudi women, portraying them in ways that clashed with religious and cultural expectations of modesty and propriety:

*"I feel that it exposes women to people and such, I feel it is not their place [i.e., not appropriate]... it is not the place for women, I mean it is not our place, for example, as Saudi women... Also, the clothing, the clothing, I don't know how! I feel it is strange; it doesn't represent us. We don't dress like that." (Farah, female, 25)*

Here, the perceived violation feels personal; it touches on the individual's desire to preserve personal and gendered dignity in line with Islamic and cultural values. The participant's discomfort stems from the misrepresentation of Saudi women and her desire to maintain such boundaries with men to preserve modesty and respect, for both herself and women in general. Hence, she rejected and described the brand's support and representation of Saudi women as inaccurate, inappropriate, and alienating, confirming the idea that cultural or religious incongruence can affect both personal and collective dignity.

Similarly, a related concern was the public image of Muslim women in brand stances that seemed to involve abandoning religious practice. As one participant commented on an activism featuring Saudi flight attendants:

*"Now, anyone appeared in the picture here is forced to give up many things in their religion. This is one of the things that makes me say 'huh?! Why?'... Like, for example, it's impossible for the hostess to appear without, or with an unattractive appearance; she has to be heavily made-up, and this is one of the things that Sharia prohibits." (Yasser, male, 29)*

This quote illustrates how brand representations that challenge Islamic teachings regarding modesty become internalised as an individual transgression of morality, not just questioning religious beliefs but even the consumer's dignity as a believer. Moreover, to some, IBA

evoked not only moral conflict but personal embarrassment at having worn or consumed the brand's products. In such instances, the activism was interpreted as violating one's religious way of life and practices; therefore, one's discomfort with being publicly associated with the brand was felt. As was illustrated by this participant:

*"For example, Balenciaga, I feel embarrassed to wear a shirt or carry a bag from them because I feel that the cause [i.e., LGBTQ+] you supported affects me personally. It is related to my religion and my habits. But Zara and Uber, it was never clear; we have never seen them supporting the cause in their advertisements."* (Amal, female, 37)

This quote highlights that IBA creates a reputational conflict for the consumer, who feels morally compromised by public brand affiliation. This case also illustrates the argument that self-disrespect is not only generated by explicit misalignment, but also by the salience of the brand's position. Activism that is salient (or severe) or outward-facing, such as Balenciaga's, compared to unclear support (e.g., Zara and Uber), increases the likelihood that consumers will feel personally disrespected and morally tainted through association.

On the other hand, self-respect can also be rewarding when BA is in alignment with values that a consumer upholds, most particularly in the defence of religious figures or for consumers who consider themselves victimised by ideological imposition. One of the participants spoke proudly regarding brands and public figures who stood behind a Muslim athlete:

*"Those who supported the player, I really respect and appreciate them, honestly, personally speaking. It was a positive step that reflects our solidarity as a Muslim society... So, the least we can do for the player is to support him. Personally, as I mentioned, I followed him and liked his posts, and I see this step as very positive."* (Mohamad, male, 34)

This extract exemplifies how value congruence can increase a consumer's sense of dignity and respect, facilitating positive emotional and behavioural engagement with the brand. Hence, BA is not a threat in this reading, but rather an affirmation of personal and group moral standards.

Overall, personal disrespect tends to be an essential lens through which consumers assess the personal impact of BA. When consumers interpret that a brand is disrespecting or deceiving their religious and cultural values, the result is often moral withdrawal or disengagement. Conversely, when brands honour those values, self-worth is reinforced, creating additional respect and loyalty. In either scenario, the interpretation of personal disrespect has a primary role in shaping consumer responses to BA in a value-sensitive context. Therefore, personal disrespect serves as a crucial interpretive filter through which Saudi consumers assess whether a brand's activism elevates or diminishes their moral worth. These interpretations inform emotional reactions and downstream behaviour and later provide the basis for the self-dignity appraisal in the quantitative phase.

#### **5.2.4 Sub-Theme 4: The Source of Activism**

The interview data reveal profound insights into the interplay between brand origin, consumer expectations, and cultural values among Saudi customers. The source of activism demonstrates how consumers assess the legitimacy and appropriateness of the brand's stance based on its origin, identity, or perceived cultural authority. Specifically, the significance of a brand's origin emerges as a pivotal factor influencing consumer interpretation. As articulated in one quote, "*if a Saudi brand supports homosexuality, it's like a slap in the face from your family*" (Maram, female, 29), the emotional weight and expectation attached to domestic brands is profound. The idea that a brand's stance can evoke familial and cultural betrayal illustrates how deeply interwoven cultural identity and consumer behaviour are in Saudi Arabia. The expectation for domestic brands to align with prevailing religious and cultural values creates a heightened sense of accountability. Conversely, when foreign brands engage in activism that challenges these values, consumers often perceive it as less personally impactful, likening it to a "*slap from a stranger*" (Maram, female, 29).

This notion is also evidently captured in the following quote, where the participant showed more tolerance and flexibility toward IBA generated from Nike's (i.e., foreign) supporting of LGBTQ+:

*"I can accept this from Nike... Because it stems from a philosophy, the liberal philosophy, from the founder of Nike... I can accept it from a foreigner and not accept it from... an Arab and a Muslim. Because foreigners have roots, their philosophy says so, they prioritise freedom... they might have a point of view, regardless of whether I differ from them, but they*

*have a point of view. I accept differences... I'd rather buy from a foreign company than buy, for example, from an Arab company. The foreign company at least has roots in this matter"* (Sara, female, 33).

Here, the participant rationalises the continued use of foreign brands like Nike despite its support of LGBTQ+, reflecting the importance of brand origin in affecting consumers' interpretation of IBA and thereby their cognitive appraisal and coping responses. In contrast, other participants demonstrate such strong adverse reactions, such as boycotting, toward domestic brands that engage in IBA:

*"My perception will definitely change because they [i.e., domestic brands] are Muslim, come on. We have cultural and religious values. It is forbidden. Surely, we will not only reduce consumption, but we will also boycott this product. We will even start a campaign for everyone to boycott it. Because if you, as a Muslim, support this group [LGBTQ+], what have you left for the non-Muslims?... So my perception will be completely different, stronger, and with different feelings, especially if it is a non-international brand, a domestic brand."*

(Haya, female, 31)

These patterns underscore a critical insight from TTSC. The interpretation of value incongruence is not just about the issue or content of the brand's activism, but also about who has generated the incongruent activism. When a domestic brand engages in IBA, Saudi consumers may experience more psychological conflict and cultural betrayal since domestic brands are expected to maintain shared religious and societal values. This perceived violation intensifies the emotional and identity-related stress appraisal (e.g., self-dignity or SIT), prompting more active or even religious obligation-driven coping responses.

Conversely, foreign brands engaged in IBA are not perceived as a challenge to local values but as a reflection of their own culture. In other words, Saudi consumers are more likely to view such foreign brands as operating under their own cultural standards, which are often associated with liberal ideologies. This allows the use of a more realistic consumption strategy by which ideological differences are acknowledged but not necessarily imposed through their consumption decisions (e.g., moral decoupling). Overall, the data reflects and reinforces the idea that IBA from local brands was often more distressing than similar stances

from foreign brands. In other words, this sub-theme suggests that brand origin is a significant contextual factor in how consumers interpret and respond to IBA.

### **5.3 Theme Two: Emotional Responses**

Emotional responses represent the immediate affective reactions that arise once consumers have interpreted and appraised IBA (Biggs et al. 2017). Consistent with TTSC (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), emotions act as rapid evaluative signals that shape and guide the coping strategies consumers employ. In other words, emotions interact with consumers' interpretations jointly to enact the behavioural responses (Duhachek 2005). In this thesis, emotional responses manifested in two broad forms: (1) high-arousal negative emotions, reflecting perceived violations of sacred values, and (2) low-arousal emotionally detached states, reflecting pragmatic tolerance or resignation. While the quantitative phase of this study does not directly examine emotions, the qualitative interviews reveal emotional experiences that play a significant role in how consumers transition from interpretation to cognitive and value-based appraisal to coping. Participants' emotions did not always present as isolated feelings (e.g., just anger or just shame), but rather as clusters of emotions that varied in intensity and direction.

Therefore, the range of emotions experienced by Saudi customers can vary widely. To explore this complexity, emotional responses are separated into two sub-themes. The first is negative emotion responses, which comprise feelings such as anger, disappointment, moral disgust, discomfort, resentment, and distress, which were most commonly linked with resistance or religious obligation motivation. The second is emotionally detached responses, which are a reflection of more neutral or low-arousal responses, such as apathetic, tolerance, sympathetic, empathetic or even acceptance. These were generally combined with responses, such as indifference or reconciliation. This process and distinction are equivalent to the affective processes that lie between appraisal and coping as conceived in the TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

#### **5.3.1 Sub-Theme 1: Negative Emotional Responses**

Negative emotions were the dominant reaction to IBA, particularly when a brand's stance was perceived as compromising a consumer's core religious or cultural beliefs. Hence, this sub-theme refers to high-arousal emotions often triggered by perceived violations of core religious or cultural values. These affective responses constitute an essential transition point

from interpretation and value-based assessment to coping, as conceptualised in TTSC. As mentioned earlier, various emotions were generated in response to IBA. For example, resentment, as an emotional response, often arises from a sense of anger or bitterness, particularly when the brand's actions are perceived as a direct affront to deeply held religious or cultural values. One participant expresses this sentiment clearly after realising Nike's support for LGBTQ+ rights:

*"My impression is bad and I didn't notice it before... I used to love them, but not anymore... My loyalty to the company now is zero. After this post, and after the support, here, I am telling you, no, there is no loyalty. The alternative is available." (Ziad, male, 44)*

This response, due to Nike's support, reflects the intense feelings of frustration, disappointment, and betrayal, especially when the brand's support for controversial issues is overt and unavoidable. In this instance, the emotional intensity stems not only from the content of the activism but from a breach of loyalty; what was once a trusted brand became a source of dissonance and rejection. Therefore, this feeling of resentment and disappointment can lead to active opposition, as seen in another participant's reaction to Huda Beauty's support for LGBTQ+ issues. The respondent expressed a heightened sense of betrayal due to the brand's perceived connection to Islamic values:

*"From that moment on, I feel that even if I thought about it [i.e., Huda Beauty], I wouldn't... Why should I spend a certain amount on a certain brand that may support a cause that I reject, and this was clear... I feel a kind of aversion, not hatred, but I just want to distance myself from the brand, even if I thought about buying from them. It is a lesser level of hatred." (Amal, female, 37).*

This sense of aversion is compounded by the perceived alignment between the brand's identity (i.e., a Muslim brand) and the customer's religious values, leading to stronger negative emotional responses and disengagement from the brand. However, not all negative emotions lead to active opposition, as some individuals may feel offended and disappointed by the brand's position, yet they still choose to continue their consumption. For example, a participant showed his upset after Adidas' ad supporting Saudi women practising sports in public, but oversaw such cultural and religious modesty appearance:

*"I, as a person, see it as negative. Because the girls' appearances [i.e., Saudi women] are not like that. I mean, not a single one of them is wearing an abaya?! And you run in the middle of Jeddah without an abaya?! These are not the girls I look at in the streets, not them, those are not them?! I only see them outside of Saudi Arabia... But do you expect that I won't buy? No, I swear it won't affect me at all."* (Fares, male, 34)

This quote reflects the complex and logical coexistence of different emotions as the participant experiences both resentment and acceptance despite the participant's criticism of the brand's message. The functional needs and product value lead to continued engagement with the brand. Moreover, several customers feel helpless in terms of making a significant impact, especially in the absence of collective boycott movements. Their response, then, is shaped by the balance between economic pragmatism and religious obligations. For instance, one respondent captures this tension by acknowledging that while they feel internal resentment and hate towards the brand, their ability to act is constrained by external factors:

*"Anything that goes with my religion, anything that goes with my principles, it makes me beautifully inclined to support this company... As for something that contradicts, if I can't boycott or take any real action, then I satisfy myself with hatred and resentment internally."* (Lama, female, 31)

Here, the consumer recognises an explicit value misalignment but acknowledges that they lack the power to make a change on their own. The potential coping strategy in this instance employs an emotion-focused strategy as the participant evaluates their management of the dissonance through internal hatred rather than external action. This showcases a broader trend among consumers who, despite disapproval, feel that boycotts at the individual level are futile unless there is a societal or organised movement to support their efforts. As another example, Osama comments that:

*"There is no societal block or organised movement like what happens in the West, where they boycott until the company meets the societal demands. When we don't have this organisation, my personal boycott won't have an impact."* (Osama, male, 31)

This citation indicates the discrepancy between belief and perceived impact, how the hopelessness of individual action can lead to emotional stagnation rather than behavioural

modification. Also, some of the adverse emotions were expressed in moral disgust terms, particularly if media and commercials started to normalise values, which were perceived to be conflicting with Islamic values:

*"When I watch a TV series or a movie, when there is a scene or a shot with a homosexual character, I start to feel a bit disgusted, or let's say I have a negative feeling towards the series or the movie, despite liking the story or the direction. But the presence and the insistence on depicting homosexual characters, especially on Netflix, sometimes makes me not finish the movie. I get out because I have other options."* (Mohamad, male, 34).

This extract demonstrates how disgust and discomfort can act as emotional signals that can trigger instant withdrawal or avoidance behaviour, even if consumers enjoy the product or content overall.

### **5.3.2 Sub-Theme 2: Emotionally Detached**

Whereas many consumers expressed strong affective reactions to IBA, others were less emotionally invested or tolerant. This sub-theme refers to low-arousal or neutral emotional states, which often reflect a lower emotional investment toward IBA. These consumers perceived a value-incongruence with the brand stance, but reacted with rationalisation, resignation, or pragmatic tolerance rather than with outrage or active boycotting. Low-arousal reactions employ an emotional distancing strategy (Duhachek 2005), enabling consumers to maintain their consumption habits despite incompatibility with religious or cultural values. One of the common forms of detachment across the participants was resignation, often based on beliefs of the indispensability of the brand or the unavailability of an acceptable alternative. Emotional energy is thus conserved by accepting the situation despite internal disapproval. For example:

*"I was able to boycott some companies because there were alternatives of the same quality. But now, I cannot boycott Uber or Zara, because I have not found an alternative company with the same quality or services."* (Amal, female, 37).

Such a feeling of powerlessness does not indicate acceptance of the brand's values but rather comes from emotional resignation to the market constraints. Similarly, in the case of dependence on WhatsApp, a brand that supports LGBTQ+ rights, some participants felt inner

conflict but did realise action could not be taken: "*I can overlook this situation because I have no alternative choice.*" (Mohamad, male, 34)

This response shows how resignation is often paired with internal disapproval, because consumers are struggling to reconcile their values with the necessary use of some products or services. Thus, this service necessity leads to reluctant acceptance. Moreover, in some cases, emotional distance was linked to cognitive reinterpretation. The participants would label brands as being under external pressures or global forces, allowing them to justify continued engagement without feeling morally compromised. This attribution of external causality reduced anger and feelings of betrayal. One participant commented:

*"We know that it's very difficult to please all parties... But personally, I know that they are under pressure... It won't affect me personally in terms of beIN Sports."* (Mohamad, male, 34)

Another added:

*"There's something I read, that companies that do not support this category [i.e., LGBTQ+], like the government will make them suffer from it... So, as a result, they say they are forced to support... the government pressures them."* (Haya, female, 31)

By framing the IBA as unwilling or strategic, but not ideological, participants were able to mentally distance themselves from the conflict. This was likely to facilitate such emotion-focused strategy (e.g., forgiveness coping) because the brand's behaviour was perceived as imposed rather than authentic. Other consumers depict the broader sociopolitical environment in which neutrality on contentious matters no longer applies, and thus justify the brand's stance:

*"Because this issue [i.e., LGBTQ+] has become one where there is no neutrality... I give them an excuse... Because they don't have a choice. They are forced, it is forced on them, society has imposed this on them."* (Sami, male, 33)

*"Now, I see this issue, for foreigners, it's a matter of life and death... all companies, willingly or forcibly, support the issue."* (Fares, male, 34)

This recognition of cultural or political pressure shifts the affective context to one of understanding rather than frustration, enabling a more forgiving or emotionally detached consumer feeling. Others framed the issue in terms of consumer interest over ideology, drawing a line between sociopolitical values and market utility. As one participant explained:

*"America or any other country supports whatever it wants... We do not support the ideas, but our interests with them or with other countries, we do not interfere."* (Wateen, female, 49)

In sum, these quotations highlight that emotional detachment does not equate to agreement. Instead, it is a form of strategic withdrawal from emotional involvement, either to shield oneself from dissonance or to maintain access to necessary goods and services.

## 5.4 Theme Three: Behavioural Responses

This theme explores the behavioural and attitudinal responses that Saudi consumers adopt after interpreting a brand's activist stance as incongruent with their religious or cultural values. It is defined as consumers' psychological responses that affect how they behave toward a brand (Crilly et al. 2004). These responses follow cognitive and emotional processing and represent the action-oriented phase of consumer engagement with IBA.

Three broad patterns of response were observed in the data: resistance, indifference, and reconciliation. This theme reflects the articulated reactions and informs the mediators (i.e., coping strategies) explored in the quantitative model (see Chapter 6). Each response reflects a broader interpretive framework and emotional experience, helping to explain how consumers choose either to reject or continue supporting brands despite ideological misalignment.

### 5.4.1 Sub-Theme 1: Resistance

Resistance refers to instances where consumers deliberately reject a brand as an act of value protection or due to religious obligation. This includes behaviours such as boycott, discouraging others from purchasing, or public disapproval. While these actions may appear similar to conventional consumer backlash, participants in this study often framed them as morally or religiously motivated, rather than purely emotional. This response was most commonly observed when consumers interpreted the brand's activism as violating Islamic teachings. In many cases, this rejection was not based on anger or disappointment alone, but on a perceived religious duty to oppose values that conflict with Islam. As an example, one

participant compared consumption to a haram (i.e., prohibited) act when it involves a brand that endorses values opposed to Islam:

*"I will not deal with them at all after that. Simply, their support for this community [i.e., LGBTQ+], that's it. I do not expect, for me, it is like a taboo to pay a riyal or pound to any entity that supports homosexuality."* (Anas, male, 37).

Here, Anas clearly links the act of spending money with complicity, suggesting that economic support is equivalent to moral support, and thus, views refusal to purchase as a form of religious obligation. This sense of obligation was further expressed in religious terms, directly taking from Islamic traditions of righteous behaviour. One of the participants explained:

*"It's from the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil, as the Messenger said, by hand, and if one cannot by tongue, and if one cannot by heart."* (Sara, female, 33).

This quotation resonates with another participant's explanation of how inner rejection remains the baseline religious duty, even when external action is constrained:

*"Our Lord distinguished us from the previous nations with this characteristic, which is enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. And deviations and homosexuality are considered wrong. If we cannot forbid it, at least we can reject it in our hearts... rejecting what is wrong in our hearts, this is the duty of every Muslim, male or female, who has a sound nature."* (Wateen, female, 49).

These observations illustrate the manner in which religious consciousness impacts coping, not as a feeling but as a call to action, either in terms of active disengagement, vocal objection, or internal rejection. These statements reflect a values-based resistance, not only in individual decision-making but as a communal and spiritual obligation. In other cases, this sense of religious responsibility was defined as emotional, especially when the consumer understood that their consumption may financially support activism that they strongly reject:

*"If I knew, and I was sure that the money I'm paying to a brand because of my purchases is going to them [i.e., LGBTQ+], then of course I have to stop. It is my duty as a Muslim. I can't*

*know about this and continue with it. I mean, sorry, this is really disgusting for me to be a part of such a thing.*" (Areej, Female, 22).

*"It disagrees with me! Impossible to allow, because as soon as I allow to buy from this place, this is evidence that I may tell you that I am satisfied with this thing, but I am not satisfied."* (Banan, Female, 22).

In these cases, the participant's affective response is tied to religious identity and the spiritual consequences of moral complicity. The language of duty, disgust, and rejection illustrates how religious boundaries are not negotiable in such cases that require action. Overall, this form of resistance reflects problem-focused, value-driven disengagement, in which the brand relationship is severed in order to preserve moral and religious integrity. In the quantitative phase, this behavioural pattern is captured through the construct of ROD coping.

#### **5.4.2 Sub-Theme 2: Indifference**

Indifference refers to a response pattern in which consumers acknowledge IBA but remain emotionally or behaviourally unaffected by it. While not necessarily approving of the brand's stance, these consumers often choose not to let it influence their consumption decisions. This response differs from reconciliation, which involves cognitive and emotional adjustment, and from resistance, which involves moral action. Instead, indifference reflects disengagement from the activism itself; consumers understand the stance, recognise the misalignment, but do not find it meaningful or disruptive enough to warrant action. This behavioural pattern was often underpinned by pragmatism, low emotional investment, or market-related reasoning. In some cases, participants acknowledged that the brand's stance contradicted their personal or religious views yet explicitly rejected the idea that this misalignment should influence their role as consumers. For example:

*"I definitely reject the way women appear like this, but does it matter to me as a consumer? In terms of the promotional video, no, it doesn't matter to me."* (Nasser, male, 30).

Here, the consumer clearly separates personal disapproval from consumption behaviour, suggesting that the brand's messaging holds little weight in shaping his shopping decisions. Some participants also expressed a form of normalisation fatigue, noting that BA had become so commonplace that it no longer triggered meaningful reactions or behavioural shifts. This

saturation led to a sense of emotional disengagement, where IBA was seen as a trend rather than a genuine or offensive act:

*"There's nothing, there's nothing at all... Because everyone is doing it now. I mean, everyone is doing it. Just now it was Adele, Adidas. Everyone wants to appear in this logic, wants to show that they are women-friendly, support women's issues, support these things."* (Sami, male, 33).

This perspective highlights how repetition and perceived inauthenticity of IBA can lead to desensitisation, where Sami no longer feels the need to emotionally respond or adjust their behaviour. In such cases, indifference is not due to value alignment but due to ideological saturation and consumer fatigue. Another participant displayed a clear frustration with the brand's depiction of Saudi women, but ultimately prioritised product quality over ideological alignment:

*"I, as a person, see it as negative... But do you expect that I won't buy? No, I swear it won't affect me at all."* (Fares, male, 34)

This quote captures the essence of indifference: recognition of a value conflict, but no behavioural consequence. Several consumers also cited market dependency or lack of alternatives as reasons for disengaging from the activism rather than from the brand:

*"WhatsApp... But I'm tied to my work, tied to many things through this application. Since there is no financial support I give, like I buy a product from them, and they go and support this category, so here the matter will not change significantly."* (Anas, male, 37).

Others perceived the brand's support as inconsequential or performative, thereby reducing its moral impact:

*"Their support is only marketing, not real support... So my feelings, from my point of view, haven't changed after seeing their support for Saudi women... in terms of consumption? It won't change either."* (Amal, female, 37).

*"I don't think it's right, but it doesn't affect my values... Regardless of my religious beliefs, they want to sell swimwear or revealing sports clothes. They are free."* (Buthaina, female, 40).

These cases suggest that indifference may result from a belief that brands are simply acting strategically, not ideologically, or from a broader sense of resignation toward market norms. Some participants also viewed the activism as irrelevant to their usage experience or as failing to reach a level of moral urgency that would trigger withdrawal. Overall, indifference illustrates that not all consumer responses to IBA are emotionally charged or religiously grounded. For these individuals, brand values may matter in principle, but not in practice, especially when functional needs, perceived insignificance, or habituation to BA override moral concerns. While not directly measured in the quantitative phase, indifference serves as a meaningful middle-ground response, reflecting non-engagement rather than acceptance.

#### **5.4.3 Sub-Theme 3: Reconciliation**

Reconciliation refers to instances where consumers choose to continue supporting the brand despite recognising a clear value misalignment. Rather than viewing the brand's activism as disqualifying, participants in this group found ways to mentally or emotionally manage the dissonance. This often involved rationalising the brand's position, minimising its perceived moral weight, or prioritising other factors such as price, quality, or necessity. For example:

*"The problem now is, will one person have an effect?... For me, maybe I don't see that difference. I don't see that one person will make that big difference."* (Osama, male, 31).

In this example, Osama downplays his personal influence and frames reconciliation as a rational response to limited impact. Osama believes his own reaction is insufficient to cause change and therefore has a resigned acceptance of the brand's stance. This cognitive process reduces the emotional burden by attributing the blame for societal change to something beyond one's control, allowing the person to overlook the incongruent activism. Others focused on the multidimensional nature of brands and used a more positive cognitive process, that brands often have both positive and negative sides, as Maram explained her reaction to Starbucks' support for LGBTQ+ rights:

*"It supports LGBTQ+ communities with a portion of its profits, but that doesn't mean that all the profits are dedicated to them. So, would I stop buying from them? No, I wouldn't. And I feel that such logos and these things cover one side, which may be negative, but they certainly have other positive aspects."* (Maram, female, 29).

This type of cognitive reframing enables consumers to separate the activism from the product, allowing them to continue using the brand without feeling morally compromised. Maram's quotation also emphasises how reconciliation or even forgiveness may stem from the participant's cognitive classification of the BA as merely a component of its broader identity. By framing the activism as a single factor and as a secondary influence in relation to other positive aspects of the brand (e.g., CSR initiatives), the participant was able to reconcile their conflicting values and could proceed with consuming the brand without necessarily needing to address this incongruity. Put differently, Maram acknowledged the tension between her values and the brand's activism but ultimately downplayed its significance, which allowed her to shift her negative emotion to a neutral or positive one. Also, in several cases, the decision to reconcile the IBA is influenced by the perceived lack of alternatives or perceived external pressure on the brand. As some participants note:

*"If there is a suitable alternative available, then I don't have a problem. Don't tell me to boycott water when there is no water. No, give me a suitable alternative."* (Fares, male, 34).

*"I mean, some companies, they sponsor this thing [i.e., LGBTQ+], and force others, like the English Premier League, some players are forced. Like a Muslim player who appears has left or refused to wear this LGBTQ+ flag, he faced pressure and ended up on the bench, the same situation, beIN Sports is clearly yielding to the pressure... if the company is under pressure, forced, you know, they are afraid for their investments... so I understand their position, and it does not affect my feelings towards beIN Sports."* (Ziad, male, 44).

These participants did not endorse the activism, but they did not see it as warranting disengagement, either because they lacked the power to act or because they empathised with the brand's constraints. It may also be considered a forced reconciliation where practical concerns and logical thinking outweigh ideological concerns. Thus, reconciliation is not equivalent to agreement. It is a pragmatic and emotional compromise, whereby consumers suppress dissonance to retain access to valued products or services. This behaviour is

captured in the quantitative model as forgiveness coping. Table 12 provides a comparative summary and analysis of theme three, Behavioural Responses.

**Table 12:** Comparative Table of Behavioural Responses to IBA

Aspect	Resistance	Indifference	Reconciliation
<b>View of Brand Activism</b>	Viewed as morally wrong or religiously prohibited; requires consumer action.	Viewed as irrelevant, performative, or detached from one's own values.	Viewed as problematic, but understandable or forgivable due to context.
<b>Cognitive Engagement</b>	High: Appraised as a religious or moral violation requiring action.	Minimal: Activism is dismissed as irrelevant or not worth concern.	Active: Consumer reflects on value conflict and justifies continued support.
<b>Emotional Investment</b>	High: Strong moral or religious conviction; emotional arousal (e.g., anger, betrayal).	Low: Minimal emotional arousal; issue is not personally engaging.	Moderate to high: Emotionally affected but chooses to manage or downplay it.
<b>Typical Action</b>	Boycott, warning others, spreading awareness, moral disengagement.	No change in behaviour; passive continuation of consumption.	Continued brand use with emotional regulation, justification, or rationalisation.
<b>Primary Motivation</b>	Upholding religious values and fulfilling perceived cultural/religious obligation.	Disinterest or detachment; not worth emotional or behavioural change.	Pragmatic compromise; maintaining brand relationship despite dissonance.
<b>Related Coping Strategy</b>	Religious Obligation-Driven Coping (Problem-focused).	No clear coping mechanism activated due to low cognitive appraisal investment (emotional detachment).	Forgiveness Coping (Emotion-focused).

## 5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter examines how Saudi consumers interpret and respond to IBA, particularly when such activism contradicts deeply ingrained religious or cultural values. Based on a thematic analysis of 22 in-depth interviews, three core themes were identified: Interpretations of IBA, Emotional Responses, and Behavioural Responses. These themes offer a rich, culturally embedded understanding of how consumers in a religious and conservative society navigate value-based brand conflicts. Findings show that consumers engage in different interpretative

processes before forming emotional or behavioural responses. Specifically, IBA was interpreted through four main lenses: religious value violation, collective identity threat, personal disrespect, and the source of activism. These interpretations reflect the way consumers make sense of IBA based on their worldview and moral frameworks.

Religious value violations were described in terms of moral dissonance and the perception that brands contradicted Islamic teachings. Collective identity threats reflected concerns over cultural erosion or social division. Personal disrespect captured the sense of feeling marginalised, disrespected, or morally misrepresented by brand messaging. Finally, the source of activism emerged as a contextual influence on interpretation and response.

Domestic brands were held to higher moral expectations and thus triggered stronger reactions than foreign brands, which were seen as operating under different cultural norms. This dynamic influenced the intensity of appraisal and behavioural outcomes.

In addition to interpretation, participants experienced a range of emotional responses, from high-arousal negative emotions such as anger, betrayal, and disgust to more emotionally detached reactions such as resignation, tolerance, or apathy. These affective responses served as a transition point between interpretation and action, influencing whether and how consumers engaged with or withdrew from the brand.

The final theme of behavioural responses captured the variety of actions that consumers adopted in response to IBA. Three response patterns were observed: resistance, indifference, and reconciliation. Resistance was rooted in a sense of religious duty and often involved actions like boycotting or warning others and is reflected in the conceptualisation of ROD coping (See Chapter 6). Reconciliation describes consumers' efforts to maintain their relationship with the brand despite disagreement, often involving forgiveness, rationalisation, or pragmatic compromise, conceptually aligned with forgiveness coping. Indifference, by contrast, represented a more emotionally detached response in which consumers acknowledged misalignment but remained unaffected in terms of their consumption, often due to perceived irrelevance or low moral salience.

Together, these findings provide a theoretically grounded yet inductively derived framework for understanding consumer responses to IBA in religious and conservative markets. Table 13 summarises the thematic structure. These qualitative insights also directly informed the

development of the experimental model presented in Chapter 6. Specifically, they underpin the mediating constructs of RVI, SIT, self-dignity, and coping strategies, as well as the moderating role of brand origin. The sequential explanatory design enables a greater depth and contextual relevance in examining the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer resistance or reconciliation in response to IBA.

**Table 13:** Summary of Thematic Analysis Framework

Theme	Definition	Sub-theme	Definition
<b>Interpretations of IBA</b>	The narrative, value-laden lens through which consumers assess whether and how a brand's activism poses a problem (Spiggle 1994).	<u>Religious Value Violation</u>	Consumers interpret the brand's stance as clashing with Islamic teachings or promoting prohibited values.
		<u>Collective Identity Threat</u>	Consumers perceive the brand's activism as undermining national, cultural, or religious group identity.
		<u>Personal Disrespect</u>	The extent to which consumers feel their personal, religious or moral integrity is challenged or undermined by the brand's activism.
		<u>Source of Activism</u>	How consumers assess the legitimacy and appropriateness of the brand's stance based on its origin, identity, or perceived cultural authority.
<b>Emotional Responses</b>	The immediate affective reactions that arise once consumers have interpreted and appraised IBA (Biggs et al. 2017).	<u>Negative Emotion</u>	High-arousal emotions often triggered by perceived violations of core religious or cultural values.
		<u>Emotionally Detached</u>	Low-arousal or neutral emotional states, often reflect a lower emotional investment toward IBA.
<b>Behavioural Responses</b>	Consumers' psychological responses that affect how they behave toward a brand (Crilly et al. 2004).	<u>Resistance</u>	Refusal to support the brand as an act of moral duty, typically rooted in religious obligation.
		<u>Indifference</u>	Acknowledgement of IBA but no behavioural or emotional change; reflects pragmatic or emotionally neutral disengagement.
		<u>Reconciliation</u>	Letting go of resentment and continuing the brand relationship despite disagreement.

# Chapter 6

## Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical model and hypotheses for understanding Saudi consumer responses to BA, particularly when it conflicts with their religious and cultural values (i.e., IBA). As outlined in the preceding literature review, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no prior study has empirically examined the influence of BA within a culturally conservative and religion-driven context, such as Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the first objective of this chapter (Section 6.2) is to investigate whether BA significantly affects Saudi consumers' purchase intentions when presented in a congruent or incongruent manner (Study 1). This foundational question is essential before examining how and why such responses to IBA unfold.

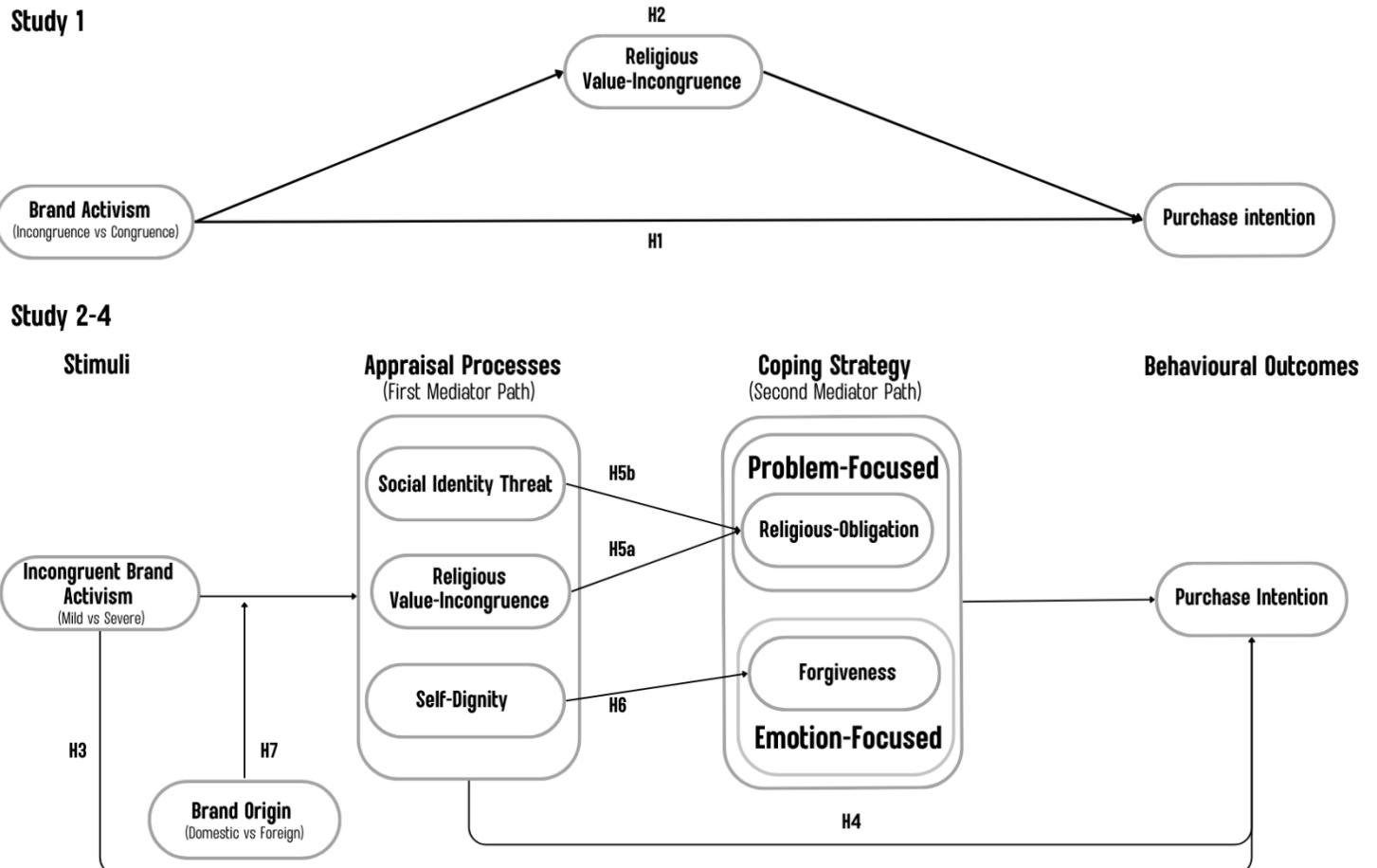
Building on this, Section 6.3 introduces the main conceptual model (Studies 2-4), which is guided by the TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Rather than assuming a binary reaction of either support or rejection (or positive and negative), the model recognises the layered and dynamic nature of consumer responses to IBA. It integrates both cognitive appraisals and coping mechanisms to explain how Saudi consumers cognitively interpret and cope in their reactions to IBA. Figure 4 illustrates the research's overall conceptual model.

First, the model introduces three key cognitive appraisal mechanisms: RVI, self-dignity, and SIT. These constructs capture the way consumers internally interpret the ideological conflict caused by IBA. Building on qualitative findings and existing literature, the model posits that these appraisals initiate coping strategies aimed at resolving psychological dissonance and preserving moral identity. Second, the model embeds two types of coping responses: ROD coping and forgiveness coping. ROD coping is a problem-focused strategy rooted in Islamic moral obligations, while forgiveness coping is an emotion-focused mechanism in which consumers reinterpret or suppress ideological conflict. These coping strategies mediate the path between cognitive appraisal and behavioural intention and highlight the spiritual, emotional, and pragmatic dimensions of consumer decision-making. Finally, the model suggests that brand origin is a moderator variable that influences how customers cognitively appraise IBA. Brand origin reflects the symbolic impact of the in-group over out-group

violations by showing that IBA from domestic brands elicits more punishment-based reactions.

Overall, in this chapter, a theoretically grounded and culture-sensitive conceptual model of how Saudi consumers navigate IBA is presented. By introducing TTSC with value-based, identity-related, and culture-grounded constructs, the chapter provides a foundation for later empirical testing in phase two (quantitative phase).

**Figure 4:** Research Overall Conceptual Model



## 6.2 Exploring The Impact of Brand Activism on Saudi Consumers

BA has been a strong influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviours as brands increasingly engage with sociopolitical and moral issues to signal their values (Anisimova et al. 2025).

Prior research demonstrates that the extent to which consumers support or oppose BA often

depends on the degree of value alignment between the brand's stance and consumers' personal beliefs (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; D'Arco et al. 2024; Shukla et al. 2024; Pomerance and Zifla 2025). However, this phenomenon remains significantly underexplored in non-Western religious contexts, such as Saudi Arabia, where value systems are strongly shaped by religious doctrine and cultural tradition (Abalkhail 2021). Hence, the first study of this thesis aims to examine the value-aligned effect and determine if BA has a significant influence on Saudi consumers' purchase intentions and to what extent RVI is a mediating variable in this relationship.

Theoretically, BA has been framed through the lens of value congruence, whereby consumers evaluate a brand's sociopolitical stance based on whether it reflects or conflicts with their core values (Bhagwat et al. 2020). When consumers perceive congruence between their personal values and the brand's position, they are more likely to respond favourably, showing increased trust and intention to purchase (Jin et al. 2023). Conversely, value incongruence evokes discomfort and adverse emotional reactions, often leading to disapproval or avoidance (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). These dynamics have been well-documented in Western societies, where value-based responses to BA are usually shaped by political orientation, individual identity, or ideological divisions (Hydock et al. 2020; Liu and Getz 2024; Shukla et al. 2024; Pomerance and Zifla 2025).

In the Saudi context, however, consumer responses to BA are more tightly bound to religious morality and collective cultural expectations, which serve as the dominant value frameworks that guide ethical evaluations (Halstead 2007; Mathras et al. 2016). The qualitative interviews in Chapter 5 affirm this orientation, revealing that many Saudi consumers interpret BA primarily through the lens of cultural and religious legitimacy. Activist messages were often seen not as neutral or secular opinions but as moral declarations that either align with Islamic teachings or violate sacred principles. For example, several participants expressed discomfort or rejection when brands promoted LGBTQ+ rights or depicted women outside the bounds of cultural and religious modesty. In contrast, some showed support for BA that was framed as protecting or empowering women within a cultural framework.

These interpretations confirm that Saudi consumers anchor their responses to BA in a broader religious-cultural moral structure, whereby the alignment of a brand's activism with cultural

and Islamic principles becomes a decisive factor in determining their behavioural response. This sets the stage for the following hypothesis:

- ***H1: Brand activism (BA) affects Saudi consumers' purchase intention, such that congruent activism increases purchase intention, while incongruent activism decreases purchase intention.***

Building on this, this study further explores the mediating role of RVI. Within a religious society (e.g., Saudi Arabia), religion is a key factor that dictates social norms and ethical behaviour, influencing various aspects of consumer decision-making (Mathras et al. 2016). Specifically, religious values play a crucial role in consumers' responses to controversial issues as they influence moral priorities and emotional reactions towards brand messages (Chaudhry et al. 2024). For example, consumers with intrinsic religiosity tend to react negatively to BA that contradicts their deeply held beliefs, such as LGBTQ-themed advertising, due to moral concerns tied to sanctity and authority (Chowdhury et al. 2024).

Furthermore, in the Saudi context, religious and cultural values are deeply entangled, such that cultural transgressions often carry religious implications (Halstead 2007; Saroglou 2011). In other words, shared religious beliefs not only provide normative guidance but also inform broader cultural ideologies (Atran and Lorenzen 2004; Saroglou 2011; Mathras et al. 2016). Consequently, when a brand contradicts a cultural value, it may also conflict with deeply held religious principles, intensifying perceptions of RVI. This interdependence, as revealed in the qualitative findings, means that brand messages which promote Western norms, whether about gender roles, dress codes, or LGBTQ+ rights, are not only interpreted as incompatible with local culture but also as conflicting with divine authority. As one participant noted, culture is created by people, but religion comes from Allah almighty (God), and there's no room for compromise (Sara, female, 33). Therefore, the perception of RVI extends beyond personal disagreement; it is often experienced as a threat to religious identity and social cohesion.

Moreover, the impact of RVI on purchase intention is particularly relevant in the Saudi context, where consumers are likely to reject brands perceived as violating Islamic principles (Abalkhail 2021). The qualitative findings and existing research have shown that consumer value-driven behaviour is strengthened in societies in which religion is at the centre of public and private life (Jamali and Neville 2011; Khan and Kirmani 2018). Thus, when consumers

perceive BA as incongruent with their religious values, they may experience moral dissonance, leading them to disengage from the brand (See Chapter 5). Conversely, brands that reinforce religious values may strengthen consumer trust and brand affinity, thereby enhancing purchase intention.

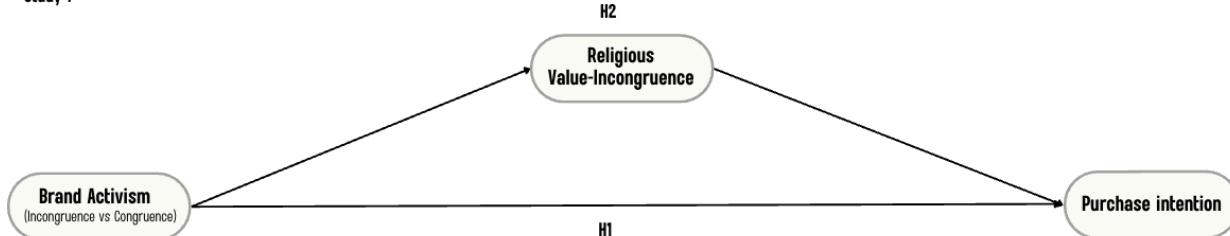
Thus, RVI plays a central role in translating the perception of a brand's activism into behavioural intention. The strength of this mechanism is especially evident in highly moralised markets, such as Saudi Arabia, where religious norms are non-negotiable. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is provided:

- ***H2: Religious value-incongruence (RVI) mediates the relationship between brand activism (BA) and purchase intention, such that incongruent brand activism (IBA) increases RVI and leads to lower purchase intention, while congruent BA reduces RVI and leads to higher purchase intention.***

By testing these hypotheses, Study 1 aims to establish whether BA has a meaningful behavioural effect on Saudi consumers and whether religious value congruence serves as the primary lens through which BA is interpreted. If the findings reveal that BA elicits minimal consumer response, this would challenge assumptions about the power of the value-aligned effect in religious societies. However, if BA is shown to significantly influence consumer behaviour, especially through the mediation of RVI, this would affirm the centrality of religious values in shaping responses to BA in Saudi Arabia. In doing so, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how BA operates in non-Western contexts, shedding light on the intricate interplay between culture, religious values and consumer decision-making. It would also lay the foundation for further investigation into the implications of IBA and the more nuanced mechanisms (e.g., cognitive appraisals and coping strategies) investigated in the later chapters. Figure 5 depicts the conceptual model of Study 1.

**Figure 5:** Study 1 Conceptual Model

Study 1



### **6.3 Conceptual Model Development: The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping**

To explore how Saudi customers cognitively appraise and cope with brands' stands on controversial issues that conflict with their cultural and religious values, this thesis adapts the TTSC by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The theory facilitates the understanding of how individuals and groups manage and adapt to stress, challenges, and difficult situations. It reflects what mechanisms and strategies, including thoughts, emotions and behaviours, individuals employ to confront stressors and maintain their psychological well-being. In this research context, BA that contradicts customers' religious and cultural values (i.e., IBA) can be categorised as a stressful situation that generates challenges and difficult conditions for Saudi customers. Lazarus and Folkman's TTSC theory, therefore, sheds light on describing, categorising, and analysing the potential cognitive and coping strategies of Saudi customers in response to IBA that may be perceived as stressful and adverse.

In line with TTSC, individuals interpret stressful events such as IBA through cognitive appraisals that determine how significant or challenging the event is in relation to their identity and values. These appraisals, such as RVI, SIT, or self-dignity, shape how consumers evaluate the meaning of the activism and what coping responses to employ. A critical component of such an appraisal is the perceived severity of the threat posed by the IBA (e.g., Atanga et al. 2022; Zhao et al. 2024; Francioni et al. 2025). When activism is interpreted as seriously violating religious or cultural principles, the perceived severity is heightened, potentially triggering more resistant coping strategies such as boycott, brand switching, or value-driven disengagement. Conversely, when the incongruence is appraised as less severe or tolerable, consumers may adopt more neutral or reconciling coping mechanisms. Thus, perceived severity becomes a critical element in understanding how appraisals guide coping behaviour and shape purchase intentions.

While TTSC provides a strong process-oriented framework for explaining how consumers appraise and cope with IBA, it also has limitations. The theory primarily focuses on individuals' psychological appraisals and coping responses and pays less attention to broader structural or societal forces, such as global cultural influence, corporate power, or political agendas. In the context of IBA, this means that TTSC does not, on its own, explain why certain activist messages emerge or why they carry particular symbolic power in global

markets. However, this thesis addresses this limitation by situating TTSC within a clearly defined cultural and religious context. Rather than treating appraisal as an abstract individual process, the findings show that Saudi consumers' appraisals are deeply shaped by Islamic ethics, collective norms, and local moral expectations. In this way, TTSC is used not as a socially neutral model, but as a culturally embedded framework that captures how global brand actions are interpreted through local religious and social meaning systems.

In addition, TTSC is deliberately content-neutral with respect to what individuals appraise as harmful or threatening. The theory specifies how appraisal and coping unfold but does not define the value systems that give rise to those appraisals (Lazarus 1991; Folkman 2020).

This neutrality can be limiting in morally charged consumption contexts, where the nature of the value at stake (e.g., sacred versus secular) fundamentally shapes the intensity and meaning of the stress response. The present research responds to this limitation by introducing culturally grounded appraisal constructs, namely RVI, self-dignity, and SIT, which specify the substantive content of appraisal in an Islamic context. TTSC thus provides the overarching process logic, while religious and cultural lenses supply the meaning through which IBA is evaluated.

### **6.3.1 Incongruent Brand Activism (IBA)**

#### **6.3.1.1 The Direct Effect of the Severity of IBA on Purchase Intention**

IBA captures the extent to which a brand's stance on sociopolitical issues diverges from the prevailing traditional norms of Saudi society, which has been shown to trigger a range of negative consumer responses (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Zhao et al. 2024). Specifically, IBA in this thesis is conceptualised as a specific form of value incongruence that arises when a brand publicly endorses a sociopolitical position that consumers perceive as diverging from their own value system. This aligns with Zhao et al. (2024, p. 1002), who define consumer-brand values deviation as "the difference between the consumer and the brand in terms of their views on the same specific sociopolitical cause on which the brand has taken a stance". Applying this logic to the present context, IBA reflects the perceived discrepancy between a consumer's cultural norms and the brand's communicated position on contentious issues. Thus, consistent with the above definition, IBA in this study is treated as a cause-specific, stance-driven form of value incongruence, meaning that misalignment is evaluated relative to the brand's position on a particular sociopolitical issue rather than the brand's overall identity

(Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Zhao et al. 2024). This distinction is important because the perceived severity of IBA depends on how strongly the activist message is seen as violating core cultural values (Tetlock 2003; Sengupta et al. 2015). Thus, severe degrees of IBA reflect not only a large gap between consumer and brand values on the focal cause (Zhao et al. 2024) but also an appraisal that the brand is challenging important religious or cultural boundaries. In this way, IBA operates as a context-sensitive violation rather than a generic value mismatch, and its behavioural consequences can therefore vary sharply depending on consumers' interpretation of the degree of deviation.

In Saudi Arabia, these values are not merely cultural conventions but are tightly intertwined with religion, such that violations of tradition often simultaneously imply violations of religious norms (Fam et al. 2004; Aldossari and Calvard 2022). Yet not all traditional norms are exclusively religious, and not all consumers appraise value conflicts in explicitly religious terms (Aldossari and Calvard 2022). Empirical research suggests that IBA effects can be detrimental to brand perception, customer attitude, and purchasing behaviour (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Klostermann et al. 2022; Pöyry and Laaksonen 2022; Gerrath et al. 2025; Khalifa and Osburg 2025). For example, consumer boycotts remain a significant consequence of IBA. Studies indicate that boycotting behaviour, which arises as a response to perceived value misalignment, tends to be stronger and more enduring than buycotting (Jungblut and Johnen 2022). Also, brands' controversial moral actions negatively influence the consumer-brand relationship (Hsiao et al. 2015) as they may decrease customer loyalty (Huber et al. 2010; Hydock et al. 2020) or even cause online protests and social media backlash (Klostermann et al. 2022). These findings verify that such reactions to IBA have consistently demonstrated negative consequences throughout the BA research.

However, such a binary framing of BA (i.e., congruence vs incongruence) may oversimplify the complex nature of consumer brand relationships. In other words, not all instances of IBA necessarily provoke uniform or extreme responses (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). For example, through the qualitative findings, different participants who perceive a brand's activism as incongruent with their personal, religious, or cultural values still decide to continue to purchase from that brand, driven by habit, product dependency, rationalisation, or level of severity. Also, findings from the brand value-transgression literature show that not all instances of BT lead to negative reactions (Aaker et al. 2004; Schmalz and Orth 2012), as the perceived severity of BT can affect consumers' responses (Klein et al. 2004; Tsarenko and

Tojib 2015; Karaosmanoglu et al. 2018). Therefore, by framing IBA in terms of mild versus severe incongruence, the manipulation introduces variation in the degree to which consumers are likely to perceive a violation of their traditional norms.

However, IBA severity is not about the brand's position on an issue per se (e.g., Atanga et al. 2022; Zhao et al. 2024; Francioni et al. 2025), but is operationalised as the degree of perceived intensity of violation of sacred religious and cultural norms in the Saudi context (Sengupta et al. 2015). This framing is grounded in the understanding that consumers in religious and conservative societies evaluate brand messaging not only in terms of personal preference but through the lens of deeply held sacred values (Tetlock et al. 2003), particularly those related to gender roles, modesty, and social/religious order (Halstead 2007; Kaur et al. 2024). Studies on sacred value (Baron and Spranca 1997; Tetlock et al. 2003) and moral foundations (Haidt and Graham 2007; Atari et al. 2023) support that severity in this context can be conceptualised as a function of how strongly a brand's activist message is seen as transgressing moral boundaries. In other words, the more IBA is perceived as deviating from religious/cultural norms, the more severe it is perceived to be (Kaur et al. 2024).

From this perspective, IBA severity can be understood as an external cue designed to signal the extent of normative misalignment. A mild incongruence condition introduces some tension with prevailing Saudi traditions, but it may be interpreted as a relatively peripheral or negotiable contradiction. A severe incongruence condition, in contrast, reflects an explicit challenge to the cultural-religious foundations of Saudi society, amplifying the perception that the brand is opposing values that are not only cultural but also religious in nature. Thus, while IBA does not explicitly reference religion, the overlap between Saudi traditional norms and Islamic prescriptions means that consumers are likely to interpret severe IBA as a more religious transgression.

Therefore, although prior research on BA (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Ahmad et al. 2022; Mohanty et al. 2025) has manipulated activism tone, message assertiveness, or symbolic cues, this study departs from these purely stylistic distinctions by treating them as vehicles for cultural/religious violations. In line with the theoretical framing above, severity is not defined by tone or visuals per se, but by the extent to which those elements convey an intention to challenge, reject, or disrespect sacred cultural and religious norms. This makes

severity context-dependent, as the same message may be considered mild in a liberal setting but severe in a religious and conservative one.

Drawing from the BT literature, the severity of IBA can therefore be described as the extent to which a consumer perceives the IBA as harmful, dangerous, or threatening (Rindell et al. 2014; Karaosmanoglu et al. 2018). Specifically, mild forms of IBA can be tolerated or rationalised, while severe, incongruent activism can elicit more substantial backlash. This aligns with TTSC's principle that the intensity of emotional and behavioural responses to a stressor depends on the perceived magnitude of harm (Fehr et al. 2010; Biggs et al. 2017). A mild violation may result in a benign or tolerable appraisal, whereas severe abuses are likely to be appraised as threats that warrant withdrawal or resistance (Fehr et al. 2010). This theoretical interpretation is also supported by the qualitative data, which shows that Saudi consumers respond more negatively toward activism associated with LGBTQ+ rights compared to gender equality issues, as the LGBTQ+ issue is perceived to be more severe and more clearly in violation of cultural and Islamic norms. Participants often described such activism as "haram," "a direct contradiction," or "a red line," language that signals high threat appraisal in TTSC terms.

Thus, analysing the various levels of severity of IBA can give a more realistic picture of how value incongruence influences consumer behaviour. This is because this method acknowledges that consumer reactions are on a continuum and that forgiveness or pragmatic consumption can coexist with ideological disagreement, as revealed in the qualitative findings (e.g., the theme of reconciliation). Also, empirical evidence of corporate political advocacy supports this argument by demonstrating that the more controversial the corporate political advocacy is seen to be, the more their brand perceptions are negatively affected (Klostermann et al. 2022).

Furthermore, research indicates that consumers interpret BA not only based on its content (i.e., the issue or cause) but also in relation to how the message is framed, such as hope vs frustration or confrontational vs nonconfrontational (Ahmad et al. 2022; Xie et al. 2024; Zhou et al. 2024; Beermann and Hallmann 2025). This suggests that the perceived severity of IBA can also be shaped by how brands choose to communicate their stance. For instance, when a brand expresses its activism with a respectful acknowledgement of opposing viewpoints, perhaps by showing empathy or recognising value diversity, the incongruence

may be perceived as mild. In contrast, when a brand communicates its stance in a more forceful or confrontational manner, such as declaring that “change must happen” or implying moral superiority, the message may be interpreted as threatening or dismissive, thereby intensifying the perceived incongruence (Beermann and Hallmann 2025). As such, even when the content (i.e., the issue) of the activism remains similar, the framing can influence how consumers perceive the severity, threat, or challenge to their values (Ahmad et al. 2022; Zhou et al. 2024). This suggests that severity is not fixed but constructed through the appraisal process, another core assumption of TTSC.

Therefore, based on these theoretical insights and empirical findings, it is reasonable to hypothesise that the severity of IBA has a significant negative effect on purchase intention. Specifically, consumers exposed to severe IBA will exhibit lower purchase intentions compared to those exposed to mild IBA. This relationship can be attributed to the heightened perceived incongruence and stronger emotional responses associated with severe IBA.

- *H3: The severity of incongruent brand activism (IBA) has a significant negative effect on purchase intention, such that consumers exposed to severe IBA will exhibit lower purchase intentions compared to those exposed to mild IBA.*

This hypothesis extends prior research on BA by emphasising the role of severity in affecting consumer responses to IBA. By investigating how different levels of incongruence shape consumer attitudes and behaviours, this thesis aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the risks associated with IBA and the conditions under which brands may face consumer backlash. Moreover, it incorporates TTSC to highlight that severity operates as a psychological stressor that influences appraisal variable that shapes coping behaviours. This makes it a central mechanism in how consumers interpret and respond to morally controversial brand messages.

### 6.3.2 Cognitive Appraisal: The First Mediation Path

Although other BA frameworks, such as social identity theory (Burbano 2021) or moral foundation theory (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), may account for why consumers react to IBA negatively, they are primarily focused on attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. The above theoretical frameworks do not account for the psychological tension and coping

strategies customers experience in responding to the tension created by the brand's stance and value-incongruence.

TTSC, therefore, serves the purpose of advancing this need in explaining consumer reaction to IBA by being more dynamic. Notably, TTSC views consumer reaction as an activity that unfolds through cognitive appraisal and coping response. According to TTSC, when individuals are confronted with a stressful event, such as a brand's position that goes against their religious values, they undergo a cognitive appraisal process to assess the significance of the event and determine how to respond (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Folkman 2020). Such a value threat prompts internal evaluation, which this thesis terms 'cognitive appraisal', which forms the basis of consumers' responses, such as resistance, reconciliation, or disengagement.

According to Lazarus and Folkman's theory (1984), cognitive appraisal is the process of evaluating the situation to determine its significance to one's well-being. In the context of this research, cognitive appraisal is understood as the way in which customers perceive, interpret, and evaluate a brand's stance on contentious issues and its impact. Following TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Biggs et al. 2017), the cognitive appraisal relates to consumers evaluating whether the brand's stance involves a personal affront to their dignity or a symbolic threat to their general cultural and Islamic community. This aspect of appraisal exceeds evaluating the congruence of values as it captures the intensity of perceived effect (i.e., how directly and severely the IBA is observed at the society and self-level). For some, the IBA challenges personal moral integrity, inducing offence, shame, or feelings of betrayal. For others, the brand is seen to undermine shared norms, provoking concern about group cohesion and social boundaries. Together, these appraisals affect the emotional and coping responses that follow, particularly for consumers who feel that their identities, personal or group, are marginalised or dismissed.

In particular, the research explores three cognitive appraisal variables: 1) RVI, the level to which consumers perceive a brand's stance to be in contradiction with their religious values. The greater the feeling of religious incongruence, the higher the likelihood that it will cause emotional distress and trigger coping responses; 2) Self-dignity, the level to which consumers feel that their personal dignity or self-respect is challenged by the brand's stance. In cultures where religious and cultural identity is more linked with individual honour, BA that contradicts cultural and religious teachings may be seen as an attack on individual dignity; 3)

SIT, the extent to which consumers are convinced that brand position attacks the social group, religious or cultural status. Since culture and religion are significant aspects of Saudi social identity, a company's association with IBA may be perceived as an affront to the collective identity of Saudi consumers.

By examining these three cognitive appraisal factors, this study seeks to understand how consumers mentally appraise and interpret IBA before engaging in coping strategies. This appraisal phase is central to TTSC and serves as a psychological filter through which external stressors (e.g., IBA) are given personal meaning, activating emotional discomfort and behavioural responses.

Moreover, the selection of RVI, self-dignity, and SIT as the focal cognitive appraisals is grounded both in theory and in the qualitative evidence. Across interviews, participants consistently interpreted IBA through these three dominant evaluative lenses: (1) whether the stance violated Islamic teachings, (2) whether it undermined their personal moral worth and dignity, and (3) whether it threatened the values or cohesion of the broader Saudi/Muslim community. These three themes were not only the most prevalent but also the most theoretically coherent with TTSC, which conceptualises cognitive appraisal as an organised set of evaluative judgements about the meaning and implications of a stressor (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Folkman 2020).

In contrast, other themes that emerged qualitatively, such as negative emotions, indifference, or different types of behavioural resistance, did not represent appraisal structures but reflected downstream emotional or behavioural outcomes arising from the appraisal process (Folkman 2020). Negative emotions appeared in clustered, overlapping forms (e.g., anger, shame, disgust combinations), making them empirically unsuitable as discrete mediators and theoretically redundant given TTSC's treatment of emotion as a consequence of appraisal rather than an antecedent (Folkman 2020). A further justification for prioritising these constructs is the absence of religion/cultural-focused mechanisms in existing BA research (Cammarota et al. 2023; Pomerance and Zifla 2025). Prior studies have predominantly examined political alignment, moral foundations, or ideological fit (e.g., Hydock et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020) but have not theorised the role of religion and culture despite its profound influence on value formation in many societies. By introducing these constructs, this study fills a clear conceptual gap, allowing the model to

capture a form of incongruence that is far more consequential in religiously oriented markets than political or moral disagreement.

Accordingly, this thesis focuses on RVI, self-dignity, and SIT because they (1) capture the three primary interpretive pathways through which Saudi consumers attributed meaning to IBA, (2) map directly onto TTSC's conceptualisation of appraisal as evaluative judgement about threat significance, and (3) provide theoretically precise, non-overlapping mechanisms that can explain subsequent emotional and behavioural responses. These appraisals thus represent the most robust, theoretically consistent, and empirically grounded mediating pathways through which the effects of IBA severity are expected to unfold.

### 6.3.2.1 Religious Value Incongruence

RVI refers to the degree to which consumers perceive IBA as conflicting with their religious values. Building on recent work conceptualising value-based misalignment as a deviation between consumer and brand values on a focal sociopolitical cause (Zhao et al. 2024), this thesis defines RVI as the degree to which a consumer perceives a brand's activist stance as diverging from the religious principles that guide their moral judgment and everyday behaviour. Whereas general value incongruence refers to broad misalignment across personal or ethical domains, RVI captures a more specific form of deviation: the perceived contradiction between a brand's position and the consumer's religiously grounded beliefs on a given sociopolitical issue. Thus, RVI centres on cause-specific religious value deviation rather than ideological differences more generally.

This framing positions RVI as a distinct and more potent form of misalignment because religious values in Islamic contexts function as sacred, non-negotiable commitments rather than subjective preferences (Tetlock et al. 2003; Halstead 2007). When consumers perceive that a brand's activist messaging contradicts these sacred values, the deviation is appraised not merely as disagreement but as a moral-theological transgression (Halstead 2007; Abosag and Farah 2014). This distinguishes RVI from political or ideological misalignment: the perceived violation is anchored in divine authority, religious obligation, and communal expectations. Accordingly, even small deviations on issues tied to Islamic teachings (e.g., modesty, gender roles, LGBTQ+ support) can generate substantial cognitive conflict and trigger strong emotional and behavioural reactions.

Within the framework of TTSC, such value misalignment is appraised as a stressor, especially when the values at stake are central to one's identity and worldview (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Folkman 2020). To the majority of consumers in religious contexts like Saudi Arabia, religious values not only shape personal morality but also function as guiding principles in everyday consumption decisions (Jamal 2003; Alserhan 2010). Therefore, a brand's stance on controversial issues when perceived as being against Islamic values can elicit cognitive conflict, which subsequently generates psychological dissonance and defensive behaviour.

The qualitative results support the significance of RVI as a critical appraisal in shaping Saudi customers' responses to IBA. Participants consistently interpreted IBA through a religious lens, using Islamic teachings as the benchmark for evaluating whether a brand's stance was acceptable or offensive. When brands were seen as violating core Islamic values, such as modesty, gender roles, or prohibitions against LGBTQ+ support, customers reported strong negative emotions such as shame, anger, and moral discomfort. For instance, several interviewees rejected depictions of unveiled Saudi women or women working in mixed-gender environments as incompatible with their religious worldview. Others were concerned with indirectly supporting LGBTQ+ agendas through their consumption, describing it as a violation of religious duty. These appraisals of religious misalignment not only trigger emotional responses but also motivate a search for coping strategies, such as disengaging from the brand or spreading awareness among others. These results emphasise the extent to which RVI operates as a primary stressor in consumer brand relationships and support the evaluation of its impact in experimental settings.

While religious belief systems can be broadly considered ideological (Eagleton 1991), this thesis conceptualises RVI as distinct from general ideological misalignment in three critical ways. First, religious values are often perceived as sacred and non-negotiable, anchored in divine authority and moral obligation, rather than mere personal or political preference, especially in Islamic contexts where the distinction between haram (forbidden) and halal (permitted) has profound implications (Tetlock et al. 2003; Halstead 2007). Therefore, a perceived violation of these values may not be interpreted as a debatable position, but as a transgression of moral and theological boundaries. For example, brand support for LGBTQ+ causes (a religious-related brand transgression) is interpreted not as political disagreement,

but as a challenge to Islamic prohibitions grounded in the concepts of haram and halal (Halstead 2007; Kaur et al. 2024).

Second, RVI invokes communal and theological justifications for action. In Islamic contexts, consumer responses are shaped by perceived religious obligations (see Section 6.3.3.1 ROD coping), such as the duty to promote virtue and forbid sin (Cook 2001; Pieri et al. 2014; Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015). As such, disengagement from a brand, boycott, or negative word of mouth is not just a personal reaction but is framed as a religiously mandated response (Abosag and Farah 2014). Third, RVI exerts social force beyond personal identity, as religious norms are socially reinforced within conservative societies (Graham and Haidt 2010). Consumers may experience community pressure to act in accordance with religious expectations, with failure to reject religiously offensive brand actions seen as moral complacency (Chowdhury et al. 2022). This explains why the consequences of RVI extend beyond internal dissonance to include reputational concerns and communal accountability.

However, in the context of BA, previous studies have primarily focused on broad ideological misalignment, such as political or moral disagreement (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Pomerance and Zifla 2025), without examining the role of religion specifically. The majority of the BA literature emerges from liberal, Western, and politically pluralistic contexts (Cammarota et al. 2023), where the dominant focus is on issue-brand fit (Vredenburg et al. 2020), stakeholder heterogeneity (Bhagwat et al. 2020), or consumer-brand ideological alignment (Hydock et al. 2020; Haupt et al. 2023). In these contexts, misalignment typically refers to political or ethical disagreement. However, this thesis suggests that in conservative Islamic societies, RVI constitutes a more severe form of value misalignment due to its perceived sacredness and communal significance (Tetlock et al. 2003). For example, research shows that consumer trust and behavioural intentions are more negatively affected by religious-related brand transgression compared to non-religious brand transgression (Kaur et al. 2024). Thus, perceived incongruent activism on religious grounds may intensify the psychological significance of IBA, making it a unique and potent stressor in consumer appraisal.

According to TTSC, the cognitive appraisal of a stressor is influenced by its perceived significance and the values it threatens (Folkman 2020). In societies like Saudi Arabia, where religion is intertwined with cultural identity and daily norms, perceived violations of religious

values are likely to produce stronger appraisals of threat, thus amplifying negative responses. Therefore, RVI functions not only as a reflection of value misalignment but as a mechanism through which consumers assign meaning and emotional weight to brand actions.

Consequently, the degree or severity of IBA may further shape how intensely consumers experience RVI. When a brand's stance is perceived to be more in violation of religious and cultural norms (i.e., severe IBA), it is then expected to increase RVI. For example, research shows that when a brand communicates its activism in a manner that appears assertive, confrontational, or dismissive of opposing views, it may signal a stronger challenge against consumers' values (e.g., Beermann and Hallmann 2025). In contrast, a milder or indirect opposition can lower perceived incongruence even if the underlying activism remains the same. Hence, the severity of IBA may influence the perceived RVI, making it crucial to examine differences in consumer responses to mild versus severe forms of incongruence.

Further, consistent with TTSC and existing value-congruence literature, consumers who perceive higher levels of RVI are expected to experience increased psychological conflict, leading to resistance or avoidance behaviours (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Sirgy 1985; Farah and Newman 2010; Floren et al. 2020). In a marketplace where religious values serve as a moral compass, brands that transgress these values are often seen as untrustworthy or inappropriate for continued support (Alserhan 2010; Eid and El-Gohary 2015). This psychological tension, shaped by RVI, can be understood as a central element of cognitive appraisal in TTSC. This mechanism triggers coping behaviours aimed at restoring emotional and moral coherence.

Therefore, RVI is expected to reduce the consumer's intention to purchase from the brand, even if other brand attributes (e.g., quality, price) remain favourable. Thus, the following hypothesis is presented:

- ***H4a: Religious value-incongruence (RVI) mediates the effect of incongruent brand activism (IBA) severity on purchase intention, such that severe IBA increases RVI, which in turn decreases purchase intention compared to mild IBA.***

#### 6.3.2.2 Self-dignity

Self-dignity refers to one's feeling of self-respect, self-worth, and identity (Heine et al. 1999; Sensen 2009; Sarkar 2025). Beyond its psychological meaning of self-worth, recent

marketing scholarship conceptualises dignity as a condition that is threatened when individuals perceive misrecognition, inequity, or loss of agency in their interactions with institutions (Lamberton et al. 2024). In this view, dignity violations occur when one's identity, beliefs, or moral commitments are not acknowledged or are treated as inferior; a mechanism highly relevant in religious and conservative contexts where identity is inseparable from these sacred values (Tetlock et al. 2003; Halstead 2007). In the setting of IBA, consumers may therefore appraise a brand's stance not only as a cultural disagreement but as a denial of their worth, particularly when the activism appears to dismiss, stereotype, or marginalise core aspects of their cultural and religious values. This reframes self-dignity as an appraisal of moral standing and respect, making it highly sensitive to symbolic cues in activist messaging.

This conceptualisation also aligns with research showing that when individuals perceive a moral or social transgression as threatening their dignity or self-esteem, they adopt defensive responses aimed at restoring control, identity, and status (Baumeister et al. 1996; Okimoto and Wenzel 2011; Davvetas et al. 2024). In religious consumption contexts, these reactions are heightened because dignity is tied to theological principles of honour, justice, and respect for sacred norms (Gibson et al. 2023). As a result, an activist message that contradicts or misrepresents Islamic values may be appraised as an affront to both personal and communal dignity, triggering withdrawal, rejection, or refusal to forgive the brand. This makes self-dignity a uniquely potent appraisal in IBA settings. It captures not just emotional discomfort but the consumer's perception that the brand has violated their rightful moral standing and social recognition.

Therefore, in collectivist and religious societies like Saudi Arabia, self-dignity is not only an internal attribute but a moral status inseparably tied to one's compliance with social, cultural, and religious norms (Cheraghi et al. 2014; AlSheddi et al. 2020). In these communities, religious and cultural principles are regarded as holy and beyond debate (Tetlock et al. 2003; Halstead 2007); thus, any action seen as violating these principles, such as a brand's stance, can be interpreted not merely as a difference of opinion but also as an attack on the consumer's dignity and social status, as reflected in the qualitative data.

Lamberton et al. (2024) explain consumers' dignity through three dimensions: recognition, agency, and equity. Recognition involves the customer's sense of being recognised and

respected by a brand in such interactions. For example, when brands depict Muslim identities or Saudi cultural norms in a perceived incongruence or in an inauthentic way, consumers will likely feel that they are unseen or misrepresented, as exemplified by participants who felt some portrayals of Saudi women were disrespectful. Hence, when brands systematically overlook the values of such groups (e.g., Saudis or Muslims), they may fail to respect the dignity of this group (Nwangu 2023).

Agency involves the consumer's perceived autonomy in making moral choices as they feel their self-dignity affirmed when they are empowered, not controlled by a brand (Lamberton et al. 2024). Loss of agency in consumption is typically experienced via a direct threat to dignity (Oka 2014; El Jurdi et al. 2024). For instance, when a consumer feels that they are forced (e.g., economically or functionally) to consume a brand that misaligns with their values (i.e., IBA), they may experience a loss of agency. Thus, mild IBA by framing the message in a more respectful manner to Saudi traditions can preserve a consumer's sense of agency by allowing space for moral interpretation or disengagement. Severe IBA, on the other hand, can destroy agency through its explicit contradiction. Lastly, equity involves a sense of fairness and inclusion (Lamberton et al. 2024). When consumers sense that their religious or cultural identity is being excluded or treated unequally in brand communication, this sense of injustice can offend their dignity and cause withdrawal. Therefore, these three dimensions combined explain how severe IBA, which may intensify underrecognition, limit agency, and violate equity, can significantly undermine consumers' self-dignity.

These three dignity dimensions, recognition, agency, and equity, map onto the TTSC by capturing how consumers cognitively appraise an external stimulus (i.e., IBA) in terms of its relevance to their self-worth and moral standing (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Folkman 2020). In TTSC, such appraisals are crucial because they form the first step in a consumer's evaluative process of meaning-making, which determines whether the event is perceived as benign, challenging, or threatening. When IBA disrupts consumers' feelings of being seen, valued, and respected, it may be cognitively appraised as an affront to self-dignity, thereby prompting coping responses such as dissociation, moral disengagement, or brand rejection.

Furthermore, this relationship between perceived respect and consumer dignity has been supported in the literature. Research indicates that consumers value respect within the marketplace as being related to their dignity (Rank-Christman et al. 2017; Wein et al. 2023).

Whenever brands communicate respectfully and inclusively concerning consumers' identity, such as through accurate representation in communication, they amplify consumer dignity as well as loyalty (Rank-Christman and Wooten 2023; Lamberton et al. 2024). When, on the contrary, consumers feel invisible or stereotyped, they interpret it as an act of disrespect, undermining their sense of belongingness and self-worth (e.g., Du et al. 2025). This is especially reflected in IBA cases, when religious or cultural misfits may feel not only ideologically provocative but personally discrediting. From a TTSC perspective, this perceived lack of respect constitutes a cognitive threat that undermines an individual's psychological integrity. The stronger the perceived threat to one's moral and self-dignity, the more pronounced the emotional distress and avoidance behaviours (Folkman 2020). In contrast, mild or non-threatening forms of IBA may leave self-dignity intact and therefore result in greater willingness to continue engaging with the brand.

The qualitative findings from this study also support this interpretation. Participants consistently evaluated IBA in terms of how it made them feel about themselves, not just the brand. Respondents described feelings of shame, embarrassment, or moral discomfort when exposed to brand stances that they felt misrepresented their religious commitments or identity. In some cases, this even led participants to completely disassociate themselves with the brand, suggesting that violations of self-dignity can outweigh positive brand attributes, such as quality or price. These insights align with TTSC's emphasis on how individuals cognitively interpret meaning violations and identity threats in ways that shape emotional outcomes and coping strategies. Thus, these expressions reveal that IBA is not merely perceived as an cultural misalignment but as an expression of disrespect to one's identity.

Furthermore, literature on belongingness and identity restoration suggests that dignity threats activate coping behaviours designed to reassert social inclusion and moral coherence (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Mathras et al. 2016). In collectivist and religiously embedded societies, this restoration is often pursued through consumption choices that reaffirm group identity. Thus, when IBA undermines dignity, consumers may distance themselves from the brand to signal loyalty to the moral community or avoid appearing complicit in the violation. This adds explanatory depth to why mild IBA may be tolerated but severe IBA results in sharp declines in purchase intention; the latter crosses the threshold from cultural disagreement into dignity harm, which consumers are motivated to correct. In this respect, drawing upon the TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), self-dignity is predicted to be a

cognitive appraisal that mediates consumer responses. When IBA is perceived as mild, consumers may be more likely to preserve their self-dignity and thus maintain a willingness to engage with the brand. On the contrary, when IBA is severe, the potential loss of self-dignity is likely to reduce purchase intention. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- ***H4b: Self-dignity mediates the effect of incongruent brand activism (IBA) severity on purchase intention, such that mild IBA enhances self-dignity, which in turn increases purchase intention compared to severe IBA.***

#### 6.3.2.3 Social Identity Threat

SIT refers to the psychological discomfort one experiences when they perceive a threat to the status, values, or integrity of the social group to which they belong (Branscombe and Wann 1994; Steele et al. 2002). In this thesis, SIT is understood as a group-based appraisal that the brand's activism undermines the moral standing, status, or cohesion of an important in-group (e.g., “Muslims”, “Saudis”), rather than just a personal disagreement with the message. Previous research argues that people strive to maintain a positive image of their in-groups, and when that image is challenged, a state of social identity threat arises (Branscombe et al. 1999; Scheepers and Ellemers 2005). Thus, SIT in this research captures the extent to which consumers feel that a brand's stance does not merely conflict with their private beliefs (as in RVI) but signals a broader erosion of the in-group's moral order and social identity.

This conceptualisation aligns with work showing that exposure to negative or norm-violating information about one's in-group generates defensive responses aimed at protecting group honour, status, and integrity (Branscombe and Wann 1994; Davvetas et al. 2024). When individuals experience SIT, they are more likely to distance themselves from the threatening source, reduce forgiveness, and engage in behaviours that symbolically restore group esteem, such as avoidance, boycott, or public rejection of the offender (McCullough et al. 1997; White and Argo 2009; Davvetas et al. 2024). In TTSC terms, SIT therefore operates as a collective-level appraisal. Consumers interpret IBA as an attack on “people like us”, triggering coping responses that defend the in-group's identity and boundaries, even when their own consumption needs might favour continued engagement. This differentiates SIT from self-dignity, which concerns one's personal moral standing, and from RVI, which

reflects perceived misalignment with religious teachings, by highlighting the specifically collective and identity-protective functions of the appraisal.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that individuals derive part of their self-concept through their group affiliations, such as religious, cultural, or national, and attempt to maintain positive images of such groups. When brands adopt activism perceived to be incongruent with these identities, particularly in sacred or non-negotiable domains such as religion, it can activate SIT and induce defensive responses. This is especially relevant to the case in religious societies, like Saudi Arabia, where incongruent activism is not interpreted as only brand messages, but as a symbolic violation against social values. Under TTSC, SIT can be conceptualised as a form of cognitive appraisal, wherein consumers evaluate IBA not just at a personal level, but through the lens of their group identity and collective value system. When activism is perceived to pose a threat to the shared moral or cultural fabric of one's in-group, this appraisal triggers stress, which consumers must then manage through coping responses such as avoidance, dissociation, or resistance.

SIT can generally be classified into two broad categories based on whether the threat is from within (intragroup) or outside the group (intergroup) (Greenaway and Cruwys 2019). The intragroup threat, such as IBA from domestic brands, can be characterised as undermining since it challenges the integrity of the group from within (Okimoto and Wenzel 2008; Davvetas et al. 2024). In TTSC terms, such intragroup violations can elicit stronger threat appraisals due to the betrayal being perceived as internal and therefore more psychologically disruptive (See section 6.3.4 Moderation Impact: Brand Origin). This is reflected in the qualitative findings for this study, in which several participants interpreted IBA as not only a brand's stance but also as an ideology imposed within the moral and cultural space of society. There was concern by some that IBA may somehow affect children and future generations with implications which translated beyond simple individual disagreement into fears of long-term societal change. These narratives reflect how IBA may become a source of threat to the cultural fabric, leading to greater wariness and distress.

Importantly, group-based threat research differentiates between symbolic threats, which are threats that address group values and worldview, and realistic threats, which address material or physical survival (Stephan and Stephan 2000). For IBA, symbolic threats are most relevant as brands are perceived to be promoting causes that openly contradict core religious or social

norms. When such norms are violated, SIT can be triggered as consumers attempt to preserve the in-group value system and in-group social harmony (Dalton and Huang 2014). Brands that seem to be advocating on behalf of LGBTQ+ rights, for example, will be expected to convey an unintended message of disrespect for religious and cultural values and generate symbolic SIT and disaffiliation towards the brand.

The literature also suggests that SIT impairs self-regulatory capacity, increases resistance, and reduces the likelihood of forgiving the offending side (McCullough et al. 1997; Inzlicht et al. 2006; Strelan and Zdaniuk 2015). In the consumer context, those whose social identity is under threat may decide to disengage from these threatening brands (White and Argo 2009) or engage in negative word-of-mouth or active boycotting of the brand (Davvetas et al. 2024). These reactions serve as coping mechanisms to restore group pride or moral dignity (Leary and Baumeister 2000; Mathras et al. 2016). This aligns with TTSC's emphasis on coping as a downstream response to meaning violation, particularly when the stressor involves collective identity or existential belonging (e.g., Sleegers and Proulx 2015).

Respondents, from the qualitative data, described feelings of resentment, worry, and even resignation when presented with brands whose activism they felt was imposing foreign ideologies or undermining their religious group's moral authority. Notably, participants were inclined to emphasise the collective dimension of their response, voicing concern not only for themselves, but also for their families, communities, and cultural fabric. These reactions suggest that SIT functions as a significant assessment mechanism through which consumers apprise and respond to IBA.

Consequently, the severity of IBA can play a pivotal role in determining the strength of SIT. When brand messages are perceived as forceful, aggressive, or morally coercive, especially when conveyed through visible or affective media, they will likely lead to a stronger SIT response. Conversely, milder IBA that leave room for moral ambiguity, contextual sensitivity, or inclusive framing might reduce perceived threat and maintain consumer-brand engagement. Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest that moderate incongruence will not result in backlash if consumers feel that their core values are not threatened. This is consistent with the idea that the way a brand frames its activism, namely its perceived severity, can mediate SIT responses. Therefore, grounded in TTSC and supported by both prior literature and the qualitative findings of this research, SIT is posited to be a key mediating appraisal through

which consumers interpret the severity of IBA and form behavioural intentions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- ***H4c: Social identity threat (SIT) mediates the effect of incongruent brand activism (IBA) severity on purchase intention, such that severe IBA increases SIT, which in turn decreases purchase intention compared to mild IBA.***

Taken together, RVI, self-dignity, and SIT represent complementary but distinct appraisal mechanisms through which consumers interpret IBA (Table 14). RVI captures the perceived violation of Islamic norms and religious obligations, functioning as a sacred-value appraisal grounded in divine authority. Self-dignity reflects the personal moral and psychological meaning of the brand's stance, whether the consumer feels respected, visible, and morally affirmed. SIT, by contrast, assesses the implications of IBA for the collective, signalling a threat to group identity, social cohesion, or cultural continuity. While these appraisals are interrelated and may co-occur, they operate at different levels of meaning (religious, personal, and collective). TTSC anticipates such multi-layered appraisal processes, and the qualitative findings confirm that consumers frequently evaluate IBA simultaneously in terms of religious permissibility, personal respect, and societal impact. Including all three constructs, therefore, provides a more comprehensive account of how IBA severity shapes downstream behavioural responses.

**Table 14:** Summary of The Key Appraisals

Appraisal Construct	Definition	Focus	Triggered by	Key Distinction
Religious Value Incongruence (RVI)	The degree to which a consumer perceives a brand's activist stance as diverging from the religious principles that guide their moral judgment and everyday behaviour.	Religious level (sacred values; Islamic doctrine).	Activism perceived as violating Islamic teachings (e.g., LGBTQ+ support, immodesty).	RVI is grounded in sacred, non-negotiable norms derived from divine authority; it reflects theological rather than personal or collective threat.
Self-Dignity	One's feeling of self-respect, self-worth, and identity.	Personal-psychological level (self-worth and respect).	Being misrepresented, stereotyped, disrespected, or forced to consume	Focuses on the individual's self-worth, not religious doctrine or group identity; concerned with

			a misaligned brand.	respect and agency rather than sacred values.
Social Identity Threat (SIT)	The psychological discomfort one experiences when they perceive a threat to the status, values, or integrity of the social group to which they belong.	Collective-identity level (group cohesion and norms).	Activism seen as eroding societal traditions or national identity.	Unlike RVI and self-dignity, SIT is about protecting the group, not the person or religious doctrine; focuses on cultural continuity and collective belonging.

### 6.3.3 Coping Strategy: The Second Mediation Path

In accordance with the TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), coping has been described as an active, adaptive process by which individuals handle stressors that threaten their psychological well-being. In the context of IBA, the brand's misalignment becomes a symbolic and moral stressor that elicits coping processes aimed at restoring emotional balance, protecting identity, or resolving the perceived value incongruence (Worthington and Scherer 2004; Folkman 2020). As discussed in the literature review, TTSC traditionally categorises coping strategies into two broad domains: problem-focused coping, which involves direct efforts to manage or eliminate the source of stress, and emotion-focused coping, which focuses on regulating the emotional response to the stressor.

In consumer behaviour research, this binary classification has been adopted to examine various consumer responses. For instance, brand switching, brand revenge, and complaining have been interpreted as forms of problem-focused coping, while brand forgiveness, word-of-mouth, and brand evangelism have been conceptualised as emotion-focused responses (Gelbrich 2010; Schnebelen and Bruhn 2018; Fetscherin and Sampedro 2019; Seth and Soch 2024). Table 15 demonstrates how several established constructs in consumer behaviour have been treated as coping responses depending on their function in alleviating stress or resolving dissonance. This supports the suitability of the current study's utilisation of ROD coping as a form of problem-focused coping and forgiveness coping as a form of emotion-focused coping.

In line with TTSC, coping responses do not arise arbitrarily but are contingent on the consumer's prior cognitive appraisals of the situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Yi and Baumgartner 2004). For example, when the appraisal of IBA reflects a serious threat to moral, religious, or social identity, the consumer becomes psychologically motivated to mitigate that distress through coping actions. This conceptual pathway, from appraisal to coping, is central to TTSC and underpins the mediation model tested in this study.

However, Duhachek (2005) critiques the distinction of problem- and emotion-focused coping in consumer settings as being overly simplistic, pointing out that such classification fails to recognise the multifaceted and culturally embedded nature of consumer coping. Similarly, Yi and Baumgartner (2004) highlight the abstractness of such categories, which can overlook considerable behavioural variation. To overcome these limitations, the current research adopts a construct-specific approach. Rather than depending on a broad categorisation, it examines discrete and contextually grounded strategies (i.e., ROD coping and forgiveness coping) that are not only theoretically distinct but also empirically observable (e.g., via the qualitative phase) in Saudi consumer responses to IBA.

This approach has two primary advantages. First, it avoids the vagueness associated with abstract labels (i.e., problem- and emotion-focused) because the analysis is grounded in constructs that reflect real-life coping behaviours rooted in cultural and religious experience. Second, it permits a more precise fit between the character of the coping strategy and its theoretical classification. In other words, in some situations, it is difficult to state whether such a coping strategy is problem-focused or emotion-focused, as some behaviours can serve both roles based on the context (Yi and Baumgartner 2004; Duhachek 2005).

The qualitative interviews provide rich support for this construct-specific framework. Participants described coping not just through isolated emotional regulation but also through active forms of resistance, social advocacy, or internal reconciliation. Some viewed IBA as a call to protect religious values publicly (problem-focused), while others sought to tolerate or forgive the brand through personal moral reasoning (emotion-focused). These patterns validate the dual-path model presented in this chapter.

Therefore, ROD coping, as characterised by value-defending activities, such as moral rejection, boycott, or brand avoidance driven by Islamic obligation, is aimed at facing the

stressor (i.e., IBA); and hence is a problem-focused coping strategy. Forgiveness coping, by contrast, includes reconciling with the brand, reframing the moral conflict, and regaining emotional balance; thus, it is a typical emotion-focused coping. In general, this study relies on the problem-focused/emotion-focused typology as a theoretical framework and addresses its limitations by utilising specific and culturally meaningful constructs for coping. The following sections propose hypotheses on each strategy and how consumers employ them to manage the psychological and ethical pressures posed by IBA.

Moreover, the decision to focus on ROD coping and forgiveness coping as the two coping mediators was based on both the qualitative findings and the structure of TTSC. In the interviews, participants described many behavioural reactions to IBA, such as resistance, boycott, withdrawal, or warning others, but these behaviours did not represent different coping types. Instead, they were often expressions of the same underlying motivation: a sense of religious duty to avoid consuming a brand that violates Islamic values. Because these behaviours stem from a single, clear problem-focused process, it was more accurate and theoretically consistent to capture them under one construct, (ROD) coping. Treating each behavioural reaction as a separate variable would artificially fragment a unified coping response and introduce unnecessary overlap into the model.

In contrast, responses such as indifference or pragmatic disengagement were not genuine coping strategies but signals of low appraisal strength; that is, situations where the consumer did not feel strongly enough to engage in any coping effort. For this reason, these themes were not suitable as mediators within TTSC, which predicts coping only when an event is appraised as meaningful or threatening (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

Meanwhile, expressions such as “letting go,” “they have other positive sides,” or “brands are under pressure” all reflected a deliberate attempt to manage negative feelings and reinterpret the conflict. These patterns aligned closely with the multidimensional definition of forgiveness coping in the literature, which involves emotional relief, cognitive reframing, and behavioural restraint (Maltby et al. 2001; Christodoulides et al. 2021). Thus, forgiveness coping provided a clear and theoretically grounded emotion-focused coping construct that captures how some consumers restore internal balance after experiencing IBA.

Overall, ROD coping and forgiveness coping were selected because they were the most coping mechanisms that appeared consistently, operated as genuine coping processes, and aligned cleanly with TTSC's distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Other themes and patterns from the qualitative phase either reflected outcomes of appraisal strength (e.g., indifference) or were simply different expressions of the same underlying coping mechanism (e.g., boycott as part of ROD coping). These two constructs therefore offered the clearest, most theoretically defensible mediators for the quantitative model.

**Table 15:** Examples of Established Consumer Constructs Used as Coping Strategies

Study	Construct	Type of variable	Coping strategy
1. Schnebelen and Bruhn (2018).	(Re-)purchase intention	DV	Problem-focused coping
	Price premium	DV	Problem-focused coping
	Word-of-mouth	DV	Emotion-focused coping
	Brand evangelism	DV	Emotion-focused coping
	Brand forgiveness	DV	Emotion-focused coping
2. Fetscherin and Sampedro (2019).	Brand switching	DV	Taking flight
	Brand revenge	DV	Fighting
	Private complaining	DV	
	Public complaining	DV	
	Likely to buy	DV	Re-engagement
3. Gelbrich (2010).	Vindictive nWOM	DV	Confrontative Coping
	Vindictive Complaining	DV	
	Support-seeking nWOM	DV	Support-seeking Coping
	Problem-solving Complaining	DV	
4. Seth and Soch (2024).	nWOM	DV	Coping strategy
	Brand switching	DV	
5. Worthington and Scherer (2004).	Forgiveness	NA	Emotion-focused coping
6. Bayarassou et al. (2020).	Brand revenge	DV	Fight coping
	Brand avoidance	DV	Flight coping

### 6.3.3.1 Religious Obligation-Driven Coping Strategy

ROD coping is a form of problem-focused coping that defines an individual's religious duty to act in ways that uphold sacred teachings by actively refraining from consuming brands that are perceived to offend religious standards. This coping accounts for how consumers translate religious beliefs into actual behavioural strategies to cope with IBA. Such coping is not passive but involves active resistance, whether via boycott, avoidance, or internal moral disapproval. It is not merely a psychological or emotional coping mechanism but one embedded in scriptural, ethical, and communal imperatives, particularly within the Islamic faith. Therefore, upon being confronted with IBA, many consumers are religiously inclined to disengage, resist, or warn others as an indication of religious commitment. ROD coping would align with problem-focused coping in several ways because it involves direct behavioural efforts to confront, reject, or limit the effect of the stressor, in this case, the brand and its activism.

This coping emerged in the qualitative data, in which Saudi consumers did not view their consumption decisions separately from their religious beliefs. Instead, moral boycott of the brand was framed as a religious obligation, a step one must take to protect one's religion and the overall moral fabric of society. Notably, some participants described their behaviours (i.e., boycotting, avoidance, moral opposition) as required, not optional. In this type of scenario, consumers are not simply reacting to brand misalignment for personal disapproval but are responding to a religiously framed stressor with a doctrinally motivated coping strategy.

This religiously grounded response is closely tied to the Islamic principle of commanding good and forbidding evil. Classical Islamic philosophers, such as Ibn Taymiyya, classified this moral responsibility into three forms: by hand (action), tongue (verbal expression), and heart (internal rejection) (Pieri et al. 2014). As Meijer (2009) notes, these types are distributed according to the place one has in society: political rulers by the hand, scholars by tongue, and simple believers by heart, considered the minimal yet essential form of faith. In a consumer context, and in Saudi Arabia particularly, denying a brand internally (i.e., boycotting or morally disengaging) can thus be interpreted as commanding evil by the heart, fulfilling one's religious obligation without requiring public confrontation. Participants in the interviews frequently invoked the concept of internal rejection as a minimal yet necessary

religious response to moral violation (e.g., Wateen and Sara; Section 5.4.1), demonstrating that ROD coping is grounded not in emotional response but in Islamic obligation.

This aligns with existing research on Islamic ethics and marketplace behaviour, which emphasises that Islamic law (Sharia) governs not only personal worship but interpersonal behaviour, economic activity, and moral responsibility (Coulson 1964; Fam et al. 2004; Cornwell et al. 2005; Achour et al. 2016). For example, in their study of investigating why Saudi consumers boycotted Danish brands after such cartoon controversy, a Saudi consumer states, "I'm a Muslim and Islam taught us what is Halal (can consume) and what is not Halal (cannot consume). Since the Danish attacked our Prophet then it isn't Halal to buy their products" (Abosag and Farah 2014, p. 2277). This response confirms that Saudi consumers' decision-making is interpreted as a religious obligation rather than just a personal preference.

In other words, the Islamic ethical frameworks view moral action as inseparable from faith practice, where external behaviour is guided by spiritual obligation, not just internal belief alone. Within this view, the Muslim consumer is not merely a market actor but a moral agent entrusted with preserving communal values (Siddiqui 1997; Cornwell et al. 2005). Also, the communal nature of Islamic ethics, which emphasises the protection of societal morality and the collective good (Olayan and Karande 2000), suggests that this coping is not only self-protective but normative. Hence, ROD coping reflects more than a reactive consumer behaviour; it is a spiritually informed and communally endorsed moral expression.

From the perspective of TTSC, ROD coping represents the outcome of a specific cognitive appraisal of the IBA as a moral or spiritual transgression, which triggers problem-focused efforts to limit or reject the perceived threat. The appraisal-coping pathway is central here. When IBA is appraised as a violation of religious duty, coping becomes an obligation rather than a choice, consistent with TTSC's emphasis on how coping is guided by how individuals interpret the meaning and implications of the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Folkman 2020).

Notably, IBA's severity plays a critical role in provoking this coping. When severe IBA is communicated through religious and culturally aggressive, morally challenging, or dismissive messaging, it will be more likely to fuel appraisals of RVI, elicit stronger feelings of social threat (i.e., SIT), and heighten perceptions that the brand is intentionally challenging sacred

beliefs. Accordingly, consumers may not only be psychologically disturbed but also spiritually motivated to act, thus engaging in ROD coping as a way of defending their moral identity and religious community. This aligns with findings of prior research that religiously motivated consumer boycotts can emerge through processes of moral violation, particularly in conservative Islamic cultures (Abosag and Farah 2014; Abdul Cader 2015).

Within this framework, RVI plays a foundational role in activating ROD coping. When consumers perceive that IBA violates sacred Islamic principles, such as LGBTQ+ rights or gender roles that violate Sharia, they do not merely observe value incongruence; instead, they are likely to interpret it as a moral or spiritual transgression. The qualitative findings reveal that participants consistently expressed a strong sense of religious duty to withdraw support from such brands, perceiving any financial engagement as involvement in un-Islamic practices (e.g., Anas; Section 5.4.1). Hence, RVI not only cause discomfort but also prompts deliberate, religiously mandated coping behaviours, such as purchase avoidance or disengagement. The following hypothesis is thus advanced:

- *H5a: Religious value incongruence (RVI) and religious obligation-driven (ROD) coping sequentially mediate the effect of incongruent brand activism (IBA) on purchase intention, such that severe IBA increases RVI, which in turn boosts ROD coping, ultimately leading to lower purchase intention compared to mild IBA.*

In addition to RVI, SIT serves as another important antecedent to ROD coping. When IBA is perceived not only to conflict with personal religious beliefs but also to undermine the moral character, status, or values of the wider religious group, it intensifies the perceived threat. In collective cultures, such as Saudi Arabia, where religious and social identities are intertwined, such a threat is likely to activate community-driven moral obligations. Qualitative participants frequently expressed concerns not only for their own beliefs, but for their families, children, and society at large (e.g., Mohamad, Mohannad, Osama; Section 5.2.2). These expressions reflect how SIT can amplify the collective moral responsibility to resist or reject the brand.

In such scenarios, SIT becomes more than a psychological discomfort; it functions as a social and moral alarm, activating religiously grounded coping strategies as a form of communal defence and value protection. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posed:

- *H5b: Social identity threat (SIT) and religious obligation-driven (ROD) coping sequentially mediate the effect of incongruent brand activism (IBA) on purchase intention, such that severe IBA increases SIT, which in turn boosts ROD coping, ultimately leading to lower purchase intention compared to mild IBA.*

### 6.3.3.2 Forgiveness Coping Strategy

Forgiveness coping is conceptualised in this study as a multidimensional emotion regulation strategy that enables consumers to deal with the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural consequences of ideological misalignment with brands (McCullough et al. 1997). While traditionally aligned with emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), forgiveness is increasingly recognised as involving a complex interplay of affective, cognitive, and behavioural processes (McCullough et al. 1997; Maltby et al. 2001; Christodoulides et al. 2021). In this context, forgiveness coping reflects consumers' ability to reduce negative affect (e.g., anger, resentment), cognitively reappraise the incongruence, and behaviourally forgo retaliatory responses, such as brand disapproval or disengagement (Tsarenko and Tojib 2011; Christodoulides et al. 2021).

A growing body of literature supports the classification of forgiveness as an emotion-focused coping strategy, particularly in cases involving moral or interpersonal transgressions (Yoruk et al. 2025). Rather than acting to change the stressor (i.e., problem-focused), forgiveness coping enables individuals to regulate internal emotional states, such as feelings of disappointment, resentment, or betrayal (Yoruk et al. 2025). It involves reappraising or downplaying the incongruence to restore emotional equilibrium and, in some cases, maintain the consumer-brand relationship (Worthington and Scherer 2004; Strelan and Covic 2006). Strelan and Covic (2006, p.1074) suggest that forgiveness can be viewed as a form of emotion-focused coping, particularly when it targets the individual's internal emotional reaction rather than seeking external resolution. This interpretation is consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) conceptualisation of emotion-focused coping, which focuses on managing affective responses to stress rather than confronting the stressor directly. In a similar vein, Worthington and Scherer (2004, p.385) adopt a stress-and-coping lens, proposing that forgiveness represents one of several possible strategies individuals may use to cope with transgressions. Within the marketing domain, Tsarenko and Tojib (2011) demonstrate that forgiveness enables consumers to reduce emotional distress caused by

corporate wrongdoing and regain psychological stability. Nonetheless, despite the rich literature on consumer coping mechanisms in response to service failures and corporate transgressions, forgiveness has received limited attention as a standalone coping strategy within ideological incongruence research, such as IBA.

In the present study, qualitative data show that participants who engaged in forgiveness coping did so not necessarily out of agreement with the brand's stance, but as a means to reduce emotional discomfort stemming from ideological conflict. These consumers acknowledged the misalignment but chose to reframe or minimise its emotional weight, thereby mirroring the logic of emotion-focused coping. Forgiveness, in this context, allowed them to preserve emotional balance and sometimes continue the relationship with the brand despite moral or religious disagreement.

In consumer research, forgiveness is widely understood as a transformation of negative emotional states, such as resentment or moral discomfort, into neutral or even positive ones (Worthington and Scherer 2004; Tsarenko and Tojib 2011; Yoruk et al. 2025). It does not necessarily imply forgetting or excusing the incongruence but reflects a shift in emotional stance that reduces cognitive dissonance and maintains relational continuity (McCullough et al. 1997; Harrison-Walker 2019). Yi et al. (2023) further clarify that forgiveness is an intrapersonal process, wherein consumers undergo internal emotional adjustment regardless of whether the brand seeks reconciliation.

Moreover, the literature widely acknowledges that forgiveness is a multidimensional construct comprising emotional, cognitive, and behavioural elements (McCullough et al. 1997; Maltby et al. 2001; Christodoulides et al. 2021). Emotionally, forgiveness involves a reduction in negative affect (e.g., anger, resentment) and the cultivation of positive emotions such as compassion and empathy (McCullough et al. 2000; Wade and Worthington 2003). Cognitively, it includes shifts in perception, such as reinterpreting the offender's intent or recognising contextual complexity (Maltby et al. 2001). Behaviourally, forgiveness manifests in the forgoing of revenge and avoidance, and a willingness to re-engage with the offender in constructive ways (Xie and Peng 2009). This view also distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation, which entails relational restoration, while forgiveness can occur independently of a desire to rebuild the relationship (McCullough et al. 1997; Yi et al. 2023).

However, the consumer-brand forgiveness literature has often underemphasised this complexity (Christodoulides et al. 2021). Many studies conceptualise consumer forgiveness primarily as behavioural, focusing on consumers' willingness to suppress retaliatory actions, such as boycotting or negative word-of-mouth (e.g., Xie and Peng 2009). While such behavioural forgiveness is critical in brand contexts, scholars have warned that this narrow view fails to capture the deeper emotional and cognitive processes involved (McCullough et al. 1997; Joireman et al. 2016; Christodoulides et al. 2021). Interpersonal forgiveness in psychology research shows that forgiveness involves therapeutic processes that help individuals transition from destructive to constructive states through affective, cognitive, and behavioural transformation (Yao et al. 2017, p. 585; Freedman and Zarifkar 2016).

This study adopts a multidimensional view of forgiveness coping, consistent with research in psychology and marketing that conceptualises forgiveness as a process involving changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Wade and Worthington 2003; Tsarenko and Tojib 2015; Yao et al. 2017; Christodoulides et al. 2021). While emotional forgiveness plays a central role in restoring internal equilibrium, decisional and behavioural forgiveness complement this process by allowing consumers to cognitively reinterpret the transgression and maintain or resume the consumer-brand relationship in practical terms. Therefore, forgiveness coping is not limited to emotional relief but instead constitutes a broader strategy to resolve internal conflict, regulate emotional discomfort, and preserve relational continuity after ideological brand incongruence.

The qualitative data in this study also point toward a multidimensional expression of forgiveness coping. Some participants described resigned acceptance, contextual justifications, or empathic rationalisation of the brand's stance, reflecting emotional reframing and a rational decision to overlook the incident. Others demonstrated continued consumption of the brand, suggesting behavioural components of forgiveness. Such expressions underscore that forgiveness coping here serves a psychological function, restoring emotional stability in the face of value-based misalignment, rather than signalling moral alignment or agreement with the brand.

This understanding aligns with literature that treats forgiveness as a prosocial emotion regulation strategy that facilitates positive outcomes (McCullough et al. 2003; Davis et al. 2013). Empirically, it has been linked to improved attitudes toward the brand (Fetscherin and

Sampedro 2019; Seth and Soch 2024), reduced retaliatory behaviour (Tsarenko and Tojib 2015), and stronger consumer-brand relationships (Harrison-Walker 2019). For instance, Tsarenko and Tojib (2015) found that forgiveness mitigates the likelihood of boycotts or negative word-of-mouth and enhances repurchase intentions, particularly when the emotional burden is alleviated. Similarly, Fetscherin and Sampedro (2019) identify forgiveness as a critical mediator of perceived brand wrongdoing and customer loyalty, showing that those consumers who are able to emotionally manage and move past the transgression are more likely to maintain the relationship with the brand. Hence, in the specific context of IBA, where value incongruence is often ideological (rather than functional) and deeply personal, forgiveness coping plays a critical role in helping consumers manage inner emotional distress. It is less about absolving the brand of moral wrongdoing and more about safeguarding personal emotional balance to enable continued engagement.

Within this process, self-dignity emerges as a crucial antecedent. As shown in the qualitative data, the capacity to forgive a brand often hinged on whether participants felt respected, recognised, or misrepresented. Consumers who perceived the brand's IBA as mild, respectful, or framed sensitively were more likely to retain their sense of self-worth and dignity, which in turn offered the emotional security required for forgiveness coping. Conversely, severe or dismissive IBA damaged this sense of self-dignity, reducing the emotional willingness to forgive. This multifaceted process is also reflected in the literature. Tsarenko and Tojib (2011) explain that forgiveness comes after the reduced emotional intensity of a transgression, either through the passing of time, cognitive reappraisal, or internal justification. Studies also find that perceived transgression severity is inversely related to forgiveness, especially when moral outrage and identity threat are activated (Tsarenko and Tojib 2012; El-Manstrly et al. 2021; Yoruk et al. 2025). McCullough et al. (2001) similarly note that forgiveness is less likely when offences trigger moral outrage and strong blame attribution.

Therefore, when consumers are exposed to mild IBA, they may perceive the brand's stance as less accusatory or disrespectful, allowing them to preserve a sense of self-dignity. Such preservation of self-dignity enables emotional forgiveness by psychologically redefining the incongruence, leading to greater understanding, which results in less bitterness and openness to continuing the relationship with the brand. On the other hand, severe IBA enhances the feelings of humiliation, disrespect, or moral integrity violation, which damages self-dignity

and lowers emotional willingness to forgive (McCullough et al. 2001; Fehr et al. 2010). For example, the qualitative findings show that participants who felt personally disrespected or misrepresented by IBA were less inclined to overlook the offence.

Thus, when it comes to IBA, self-dignity can function as a trigger for forgiveness or impede the emotional reframing that is essential for forgiveness. In other words, self-dignity can function as a psychological buffer that enables forgiveness processing rather than a defensive reaction. Consumers will likely forgive when their dignity is preserved under mild IBA, but severe IBA hinders this process by reducing the emotional resources that forgiveness requires.

- *H6: Self-dignity and forgiveness coping sequentially mediate the effect of incongruent brand activism (IBA) on purchase intention, such that mild IBA increases self-dignity, which increases forgiveness coping, ultimately leading to higher purchase intention compared to severe IBA.*

#### 6.3.4 Moderation Impact: Brand Origin

Through the theme source of activism, the qualitative findings indicate that brand origin functions as a critical moderator in shaping Saudi consumers' responses to IBA. That is, consumers' cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and coping strategies were found to differ significantly depending on whether the activism originated from a foreign or domestic brand. As mentioned previously (see Section 5.2.4), many of the participants revealed stronger feelings of betrayal, cultural violation, and outrage when a domestic brand participates in supporting activism that is contrary to cultural or Islamic values. In contrast, identical actions by foreign brands were often evaluated with more tolerance and emotional detachment.

This pattern is consistent with prior research, which suggests that brand origin powerfully influences consumer moral judgment, especially under conditions involving value violations (Abrams et al. 2000; Shinada et al. 2004; Davvetas et al. 2024). Brand origin is not a neutral cue; it is deeply embedded in consumer identity (Thakor 1996; Allman et al. 2016).

Therefore, it activates distinguished appraisals depending on the cultural proximity between the brand and the consumer (Samiee and Chabowski 2021; Shukla et al. 2024). In contexts where religion and culture are central to national identity, brands that are perceived as local or domestic are expected to represent and uphold those values. When domestic brands are

seen to violate religious or cultural traditions, the perceived transgression is amplified (Davvetas et al. 2024), resulting in stronger stress appraisals and more severe coping mechanisms, such as boycott or ROD coping.

Indeed, consumers often view domestic brands as part of their in-group identity (Özsomer 2012; Davvetas et al. 2024). As such, their misconduct is interpreted not merely as a corporate misstep but as a violation of collective values, undermining both personal self-concept (e.g., self-dignity) and social identity (Pandya et al. 2024). This aligns with the "black sheep effect," which refers to the phenomenon where in-group members are judged more harshly than out-group members when they violate shared norms (Marques and Paez 1994; Abrams et al. 2000; Davvetas et al. 2024).

Davvetas et al. (2024) further introduce the "origin-backfire effect," which suggests that consumers are less forgiving of domestic brands after a transgression. Misconduct by domestic brands has broader negative spillovers, tarnishing not just the offending brand but also the home country, domestic businesses, and country reputation (Magnusson et al. 2014; Borah and Tellis 2016; Stäbler and Fischer 2020; Giannetti and Srinivasan 2021). In Saudi Arabia, when domestic brands engage in IBA that is perceived as culturally inappropriate, the emotional and moral consequences are expected to be heightened, triggering identity threat and stronger coping strategies rooted in religious or national norms.

In contrast, foreign brands engaging in IBA are evaluated through a different lens. Consumers tend to interpret their actions as expressions of external cultural values, such as Western liberalism or secular ideologies, which are not expected to align with local religious norms (Özturan and Grinstein 2022; Davvetas et al. 2024). Therefore, these brands are less likely to provoke feelings of betrayal or self-concept threat. Instead, consumers may interpret the activism as culturally distant, which enables them to emotionally detach or employ emotion-focused coping strategies like acceptance or forgiveness.

Real-life examples in the Saudi context also mirror such dynamics. In the case of the Danish cartoon controversy (See Section 2.2.5), Arla Foods, a Danish company, sought to reduce backlash by disassociating itself from its domestic roots and signalling that its goods were made in Saudi Arabia (Abosag and Farah 2014). Similarly, during the boycott of McDonald's related to the war in Palestine, the Saudi franchise emphasised local ownership and

independence from foreign operations to protect its brand equity (Abueish 2024). The examples illustrate how companies strategically use origin cues to shape the attitudes of customers during a time of crisis. Another instructive case is Nike's campaign, "What If You Can?", which aimed to challenge traditional gender roles in Saudi society. Despite ideological tensions, Nike's ad received less backlash compared to a domestic brand (Nada), which faced immediate boycotts following a much milder campaign promoting social change (BBC News 2019). These contrasting outcomes reflect the amplifying effect of brand origin on consumer reaction to activism.

Burgoon and Hale (1988) explain such patterns. They state that when a local brand violates deeply embedded cultural expectations, the perceived betrayal is more profound and hence elicits stronger adverse reactions. Activism by foreign brands, however, which are associated with different value systems, is less likely to result in expectancy violations, allowing for more cognitive accommodation or forgiveness (Özturan and Grinstein 2022). Therefore, the current study proposes that brand origin moderates the impact of IBA severity on cognitive appraisals. Domestic brands are more likely to trigger RVI, SIT, and threats to self-dignity, which then escalate coping responses and reduce purchase intention. Foreign brands, on the other hand, evoke less intense appraisals, resulting in less punitive or defensive behaviours.

- *H7: Brand origin moderates the effect of incongruent brand activism (IBA) severity on consumers' cognitive appraisals, such that severe (mild) IBA by a domestic (foreign) brand will lead to stronger (weaker) perceptions of religious value-incongruence, social identity threat, and lower (higher) perception of self-dignity compared to severe (mild) IBA by a foreign (domestic) brand.*

## 6.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter developed a comprehensive theoretical model to explain Saudi consumers' responses to IBA using the TTSC. Drawing on both qualitative insights and relevant literature, the model theorises that IBA serves as a psychological stressor that triggers cognitive appraisal and coping strategies, affecting consumers' responses. The first part (Study 1) explained whether BA directly influences purchase intention and the mediating role of RVI. It aims to confirm that in religious and conservative contexts, consumers react strongly to value congruence misalignment, and RVI is a key mediating mechanism to explain such a misalignment. The model, then, articulated the impact of IBA severity by

proposing a two-pathway mediation model grounded in TTSC. The cognitive appraisal pathway introduces RVI, self-dignity, and SIT as fundamental appraisals of the IBA, each being a unique but intersecting facet of psychological stress. RVI represents value conflict, self-dignity reflects personal moral offence, and SIT signals collective identity threat. These appraisals are proposed to sequentially lead to coping strategies, ultimately affecting consumer behaviour.

The coping pathway contains two distinct types of coping strategies: ROD coping and forgiveness coping. ROD coping has been regarded as a form of problem-focused coping driven by religious beliefs and obligations. It involves resistance behaviour like moral rejection, brand avoidance, and boycott. Forgiveness coping is regarded as an emotion-focused method of coping which helps consumers manage internal dissonance, maintain emotional harmony, and, in some cases, maintain the relationship with the brand even during the existence of ideological incongruity. The chapter also identified a moderator, brand origin, that is expected to strongly influence the appraisal process. Brand origin determines the intensity of consumer responses. Domestic brands that violate local values are expected to induce stronger emotional and moral backlash, capturing the "black sheep" and "origin-backfire" effects.

The selection of RVI, SIT, self-dignity, ROD coping, and forgiveness coping as the focal mediators in the conceptual model reflects a direct translation of the most theoretically meaningful and consistently expressed appraisal and coping mechanisms identified in the qualitative phase. Although the interviews revealed a broad range of reactions (e.g., anger, indifference, rhetorical resistance, resignation), these themes did not each represent distinct psychological processes suitable for mediation analysis within TTSC. Instead, the qualitative findings indicated that consumers' experiences clustered around three core appraisal mechanisms, perceived religious violation, personal dignity threat, and collective identity threat, which directly shaped their subsequent coping responses. Likewise, behavioural expressions such as boycott, avoidance, or warning others converged around a single underlying problem-focused process (ROD coping), while reconciliation, tolerance, and emotional letting-go mapped onto forgiveness coping as an emotion-focused strategy. These constructs therefore represent the clearest, theoretically grounded pathways through which IBA severity influences purchase intention, and they form the basis for the hypotheses summarised in Table 16.

In sum, the chapter proposed seven hypotheses (H1–H7) that collectively map the complex pathways through which IBA influences consumer behaviour in the Saudi context (Table 16). The theoretical model contributes to both TTSC and BA studies by capturing complex religious values, moral reasoning, cultural identity, and consumer coping processes in a non-Western religious community. These hypotheses will be empirically tested in the next phase via an experimental design.

**Table 16:** Hypothesis Summary Table (H1–H7)

Hypothesis (Study)	Pathway / Focus	Hypothesis Summary
H1 (Study 1)	Direct effect	BA affects purchase intention (congruent BA ↑, incongruent BA ↓).
H2 (Study 1)	Mediation	RFI mediates the effect of BA on purchase intention.
H3 (Study 2)	Direct effect	IBA affects purchase intention (mild IBA ↑, severe IBA ↓).
H4a (Study 3)	(Direct) Mediation	RFI mediates the effect of IBA on purchase intention (IBA → ↑ RFI → ↓ PI).
H4b (Study 3)		Self-dignity mediates the effect of IBA on purchase intention (IBA → ↓ SD → ↑ PI).
H4c (Study 3)		SIT mediates the effect of IBA on purchase intention (IBA → ↑ SIT → ↓ PI).
H5a (Study 3)	Serial mediation	IBA → ↑ RFI → ↑ ROD → ↓ PI.
H5b (Study 3)		IBA → ↑ SIT → ↑ ROD → ↓ PI.
H6 (Study 3)		IBA → ↓ SD → ↑ FC → ↑ PI.
H7 (Study 4)	Moderated mediation (Brand Origin)	IBA × Brand Origin → RFI (domestic brand strengthens link) → ↑ ROD → ↓ PI.
		IBA × Brand Origin → SIT (domestic brand strengthens link) → ↑ ROD → ↓ PI.
		IBA × Brand Origin → SD (foreign brand strengthens link) → ↑ FC → ↑ PI.

Notes: **BA**= Brand activism. **IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **RFI**= Religious value-incongruence.

**ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat. **SD**= Self-dignity. **FC**= Forgiveness coping. **PI**= Purchase intention.

# Chapter 7

## Research Methodology - Quantitative Phase

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the quantitative research methods employed in this study, detailing the research design, sample selection, data collection procedures, construct measurement, and experimental manipulation. The primary aim of this quantitative phase is to test the conceptual model developed from the qualitative findings and literature review, examining the relationships between cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and consumer behavioural responses to IBA. By employing an experimental design methodology, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence on how Saudi consumers react to IBA.

Specifically, the chapter begins with Section 7.2, describing the experimental research design that is employed in the quantitative phase and its advantages by outlining how online experiments allow for the establishment of causal relationships. Next, Section 7.3 outlines the pre-test phase conducted to refine the experimental design by verifying issue controversy, assessing IBA severity, and ensuring the effectiveness of the manipulation materials.

Following that, Section 7.4 details the experimental procedures used to manipulate independent variables across four studies, focusing on BA, IBA, and brand origin effects. The following is Section 7.5, which describes the recruitment process and sampling strategy used across all studies, detailing how a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods facilitated participant recruitment in the Saudi context. Section 7.6 provides a comprehensive overview of the research constructs, their measurement items, and sources, ensuring alignment with prior research while adapting the scales to the study's context. Finally, Section 7.7 discusses the validity and reliability of the research, ensuring that the experiment accurately measures the intended constructs and produces consistent results across different contexts.

### 7.2 Experimental Design

Following the qualitative phase (Phase One), which involves collecting data through semi-structured in-depth interviews, the subsequent quantitative phase aims to achieve generalisability and validate findings by testing hypotheses derived from the interview data. Among various research designs, experimental research is widely considered the “gold

standard” due to its ability to identify causal relationships (Bhattacherjee 2019). At its core, experimental design involves manipulating one or more independent variables (i.e., treatment group) while controlling other factors to observe their effect on a dependent variable. This methodological framework allows researchers to establish cause-and-effect relationships rather than merely identifying correlations, which sets it apart from observational or descriptive studies (Clark et al. 2021).

Typically, participants in an experiment are either assigned to an experimental stimulus (the treatment group) or withheld from such exposure (the control group). By comparing outcomes (dependent variables) across treatment and control groups, researchers can determine whether the manipulation of the independent variable produces measurable and significant differences. Therefore, the defining feature of experimental design is its ability to isolate and assess specific variables under controlled conditions. Through treatment manipulation, a researcher can control the “cause” in cause-effect relationships, ensuring that any observed differences in outcomes are attributable solely to the experimental intervention (Bhattacherjee 2019). In online experiments, this often involves presenting participants with carefully constructed scenarios, tasks, or stimuli that differ systematically according to predefined experimental conditions (Kim 2024). For example, researchers may manipulate the wording of a message, the layout of a webpage, or the timing of an intervention to test how these changes influence subjects’ behaviour or decision-making (i.e., dependent variables).

Moreover, experimental research contains different design types that address different research objectives. In particular, one-factor (or single-factor) designs aim to manipulate a single independent variable to test its direct impact on the dependent variable(s), providing clear direct cause-and-effect relationships (Bhattacherjee 2019). This approach is more suitable when researchers aim to solely investigate the impact of one factor while controlling other variables. In contrast, factorial designs, such as the widely used 2x2 factorial design, allow researchers to examine the effects of two independent variables simultaneously, as well as their interaction (Bhattacherjee 2019). The advantage of this approach is that it discloses not only the individual impact of each independent variable but also how they may combine (or interact) to influence outcomes.

In this thesis, Studies 1 through 3 adopt a one-factor experimental design, focusing on the manipulation of a single variable (e.g., IBA) to test its isolated effects on Saudi cognitive appraisals and coping strategies. Study 4, however, employs a 2x2 factorial design, enabling the investigation of two independent variables (i.e., IBA vs brand origin) and their potential interaction. This progression from single-factor to factorial designs reflects the increasing complexity of the research questions addressed in this thesis, ensuring that each study aligns with its specific objectives while contributing to the overall research aims.

### **7.3 Pre-test**

Three pre-tests were conducted before the main studies to primarily examine 1) the controversiality of the selected issues, 2) the level of IBA severity, and 3) the effectiveness of manipulative materials.

#### **7.3.1 Pre-test\_1**

The first pre-test had two objectives. The first was to confirm that the selected issues, gender equality and women's rights, Saudi Arabia hosting music festivals, and LGBTQ+ rights, were perceived as controversial among Saudi consumers. To establish this, the following definition of a controversial issue was presented to participants: "Controversial issues are those that cause a difference in opinions due to differences in perspectives, values, or traditions" (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). Participants were then presented with ten issues and asked: "To what extent do you think these issues are considered controversial?" (1 = Extremely uncontroversial, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Extremely controversial). The list of ten issues included topics such as freedom of speech, immigrant rights, and the Palestine conflict, along with the three focal issues of gender equality and women's rights, Saudi Arabia hosting music festivals, and LGBTQ+ rights (see Appendix K).

The second objective was to confirm which BA stances were perceived as incongruent with Saudi traditions. To achieve this, participants read ten statements describing events as either aligning with or conflicting against Saudi traditions and were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a 7-point Likert scale. Example items included: (1) "Saudi women participating in public sports, such as swimming, boxing, and running conflicts with Saudi traditions", (2) "Hosting public musical festivals and concerts aligns with Saudi traditions", and (3) "Supporting homosexuality aligns with Saudi traditions" (see Appendix K). These statements provided a basis for identifying which BA stances would be considered

congruent or incongruent with Saudi traditions, thereby informing the IBA manipulations. In addition, the first and second statements were also used as a second manipulation check for IBA severity in Studies 3 & 4. It was expected that participants in the severe conditions would score higher than those in mild conditions, confirming that the severe IBA condition resulted in a higher degree of incongruence. A total of  $N = 25$  participants took part in this pre-test.

### **7.3.2 Pre-test\_2**

The objective of this pre-test was to assess the effectiveness of the severity manipulation in IBA, distinguishing between Mild and Severe conditions (Appendix L). To achieve this, two versions of tweets from a fictitious brand were developed, each expressing support for a controversial issue in Saudi Arabia. The distinction between Mild and Severe IBA was achieved through verbal and visual cues, where the brand's statement varied in tone and emphasis, signalling either a moderate stance (i.e., Mild IBA) or a more assertive and provocative stance (i.e., Severe IBA) (see Section 7.4 for detailed manipulation descriptions).

To ensure the robustness of this manipulation, the pre-test was designed with four experimental conditions, as it examined two distinct issues: (1) Saudi women's participation in public sports and (2) Saudi Arabia's hosting of music festivals. The manipulation of IBA severity followed the same structure across both topics, with each issue having a Mild and a Severe IBA condition. Participants ( $N = 56$ ) were randomly assigned to one of these four conditions. Across all the experimental conditions, the fictitious brand, FitFlex, posted a tweet advocating for an issue that conflicts with Saudi traditions to reflect the IBA condition. The manipulation of IBA severity was then embedded within the brand's stance (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). For the Mild IBA condition, the brand's stance was framed with more religiously balanced language, acknowledging and respecting cultural traditions (e.g., "while also respecting traditional and cultural values"). Conversely, in the Severe IBA condition, the brand's stance signals a more direct challenge to religious and cultural norms, explicitly positioning its advocacy in opposition to cultural traditions (e.g., "despite traditional and cultural values").

In the gender equality issue, the manipulation was further reinforced through visual cues. Participants viewed an image of a Saudi female track and field athlete, with her attire varying by condition. In the Mild IBA condition, the athlete wore a hijab, long sleeves, and modest-

fitting pants, signalling some alignment with Saudi traditional norms (Fam et al. 2004). In contrast, in the Severe IBA condition, the same athlete was depicted without a hijab, wearing a short-sleeved (elbow-length) top and tighter pants ending mid-leg, thereby reflecting greater incongruence with Saudi cultural values (Fam et al. 2004).

After exposure to the stimulus materials, participants responded to the following manipulation check: "How would you describe the severity of the brand's tweet in relation to Saudi traditions?" Responses were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = Very mild, 4 = Average, 7 = Very severe) (Davvetas et al. 2024). This pre-test was designed to assess whether participants perceived a meaningful distinction between the Mild and Severe IBA conditions. Establishing this distinction was essential for validating the manipulation's effectiveness for use in the main study.

### **7.3.3 Pre-test\_3**

The third pre-test aimed to examine the effectiveness of the manipulation materials and to ensure that participants perceived each manipulation as intended (see Appendix M). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: 1) IBA Mild condition (Saudi Brand) and 2) IBA Severe condition (American Brand). It is important to note that the objective of this pre-test was not to compare the two groups but rather to confirm whether participants understood and correctly processed the manipulations. Specifically, it tested whether participants in the Mild condition (Saudi brand) correctly recognised both the Mild IBA stance and the domestic brand origin, and whether participants in the Severe condition (American brand) correctly recognised both the Severe IBA stance and the foreign brand origin.

For IBA, a memory-based manipulation check was used to ensure that participants accurately recalled the brand's stance from the tweet. This approach is commonly used in experimental research, as it verifies attentiveness and factual recall rather than relying on subjective perceptions, thereby minimising demand characteristics (e.g., social desirability bias) and response biases (Freeman et al. 2009). Participants were asked: "What did FitFlex state in the previous tweet?" The correct response option varied depending on the assigned condition (Mild vs. Severe) but followed this structure:

1. "Saudi women's participation in public sports should be encouraged despite traditional Saudi values."
2. "Saudi women's participation in public sports should be encouraged while respecting traditional Saudi values."
3. "I do not know."

Participants in the Severe condition were expected to select option (a), while those in the Mild condition were expected to choose option (b). Correct recall confirmed that participants could distinguish between Mild and Severe incongruence.

Brand origin was also manipulated and measured following an established research (Sichtmann et al. 2019; Riefler 2020; Davvetas et al. 2024), using a 7-point Likert scale. Participants responded to the following two items: 1) "FitFlex is a domestic (foreign) brand," and 2) "The country FitFlex originated from is Saudi Arabia (United States)." This allowed for an objective check of whether participants correctly identified the brand's country of origin, ensuring that the brand origin manipulation was successful. A total of N=25 participated in the third pre-test. By implementing these manipulation checks, the pre-test provided a rigorous assessment of whether participants perceived the experimental manipulations as intended, ensuring that the stimuli were valid for use in the main study.

## **7.4 Independent Variables: Manipulations and Experimental Procedure**

### **7.4.1 Brand Activism Manipulation**

#### **7.4.1.1 Study 1**

The independent variable in Study 1 is brand activism (congruent vs. incongruent). To manipulate this variable, the study adopted established experimental procedures in BA research (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Ahmad et al. 2024). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions and were introduced to a fictitious sports brand, FitFlex. The brand was described as a company that frequently takes public stances on controversial issues, particularly those related to equality.

To operationalise the manipulation, two versions of a brand tweet were created, each presenting FitFlex's stance on LGBTQ+ rights in Saudi Arabia (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; see Appendix N). In the incongruent activism condition, participants viewed a tweet in

which FitFlex expresses support for LGBTQ+ rights in Saudi Arabia. This position conflicts with the Saudi prevailing religious and cultural norms, as demonstrated in Pre-test 1.

Conversely, in the congruent activism condition, participants were shown a tweet where FitFlex states that it does not support LGBTQ+ rights, thereby aligning with traditional Saudi values. Both tweets preserved identical branding elements, including the brand's name, verified badge, four lines of body text, timestamp, and engagement metrics (e.g., retweets, likes), ensuring that the only difference lay in the brand's stated position.

Following prior studies (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Ahmad et al. 2024; Zhou et al. 2024), verbal manipulation was employed to establish the experimental conditions. In both versions, the tweet began with the exact introductory phrase: "At FitFlex, we believe that LGBTQ+ rights...". The continuation, however, diverged according to condition:

- **Incongruent activism condition:** "*...should be supported despite Saudi traditional societal values.*"
- **Congruent activism condition:** "*...should not be supported as it misaligns with Saudi traditional societal values.*"

To logicalise and reinforce the manipulation, additional text was included:

- **Incongruent activism condition:** "*This is about inclusivity and equality for all, regardless of sexual orientation. LGBTQ+ people have been badly affected for far too long due to these restrictions and mistreatment.*"
- **Congruent activism condition:** "*This is about preserving cultural and moral traditions while respecting all individuals. Saudis have been honourably respected for far so long due to their appreciation of cultural values.*"

All other design elements, including font, layout, and hashtags, remained constant across conditions. After exposure to the stimulus, participants proceeded to complete measures of the manipulation checks, followed by dependent and mediating variables, and ended with demographic questions.

#### 7.4.2 Incongruent Brand Activism Severity Manipulation

The IBA severity manipulation was operationalised at two levels, Mild and Severe, through both verbal and visual cues. Across the studies, the brand's advocacy was positioned as

incongruent with Saudi traditions, as established in the pre-tests. Particularly, in the case of the Mild IBA condition, the brand's stance was articulated using language that was more religiously balanced, acknowledging and respecting cultural traditions (e.g., "while also respecting traditional and cultural values") and used modest visuals (e.g., a female athlete wearing a hijab and conservative attire), thereby suggesting partial alignment or at least cultural sensitivity. In contrast, under the Severe IBA condition, the brand's position indicated a more straightforward challenge to cultural and religious norms, making its advocacy explicitly contrary to cultural traditions (e.g., "despite traditional and cultural values") and presenting visuals that more clearly deviated from cultural modesty norms (e.g., a hijab-less athlete in shorter and tighter clothing). These verbal and visual elements were introduced as complementary means of amplifying the perceived religious and cultural deviance of the brand's stance.

In particular, in Studies 2 and 4, the distinction between the mild and severe conditions lay in the extent to which the brand's stance signalled a violation of prevailing religious and cultural norms. In the mild condition, the brand expressed support for women's participation in public sports while simultaneously emphasising empowerment and respect for cultural traditions. This framing allowed the message to be interpreted as more compatible with cultural continuity, thereby limiting the perceived incongruence. In contrast, the severe condition presented the same supportive stance but explicitly attributed social restrictions or women's struggles to traditional cultural values and positioned these values as barriers to progress. For example, statements such as "Saudi women have been badly affected for far too long by such cultural values and a lack of equality" directly challenged established traditions

Similarly, in Study 3, in the mild condition, the brand expressed support for music and public events in Saudi Arabia but explicitly emphasised respect for traditional cultural and religious values. This framing implied that, although music itself is commonly considered prohibited by many Saudis, such events could be organised in ways that align with local traditions, for example, through modest formats or gender segregation. By doing so, the brand acknowledged boundaries that reduce the perceived degree of violation. In contrast, the severe condition communicated support for concerts without regard for traditional values, instead framing openness to global music as a progressive necessity and identifying "cultural restrictions" as the cause of suffering. The severe message, therefore, positioned cultural and religious norms as obstacles and suggested a broader disregard for established boundaries,

including modesty, gender separation, and other traditional restrictions, thereby intensifying the perception of violations of religious and cultural values.

This approach enables the manipulation to remain consistent with the cultural logic of moral evaluation in Saudi Arabia, where even slight deviations from traditional values can carry significant moral weight. Therefore, this operationalisation of severity as a normative environment violation enhances the ecological validity of the experiment and supports the investigation of consumers' psychological reactions under realistic conditions of ideological tension. The following sections further explain the manipulation process for each study.

#### 7.4.2.1 Study 2

The independent variable in Study 2 is IBA severity, operationalised at two levels: Mild and Severe. The experimental procedure closely followed that of Study 1, drawing on established practices in BA research (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Ahmad et al. 2024).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions and introduced to the fictitious sports brand FitFlex. The brand was described as a company that frequently takes public stances on controversial issues, particularly those relating to gender equality.

Participants then read the following statement:

*"The brand recently tweeted to clarify its stance on Saudi women's right to equal opportunities to participate publicly in sports such as football matches, swimming, boxing, running, and more."*

To implement the manipulation, two versions of a brand tweet were created, each expressing FitFlex's support for Saudi women's participation in sports. In both conditions, the stance was incongruent with Saudi traditions, consistent with findings from the first pre-test. The tweets retained identical branding features, including the brand name, verified badge, five lines of body text, timestamp, and engagement metrics (e.g., retweets, likes). Following prior studies (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024), the manipulation employed both verbal and visual cues to differentiate severity levels, as established in pre-test 2 (see Appendix L). Both tweets opened with the exact initial phrase:

*"At FitFlex, we believe that Saudi women's participation in public sports of all kinds should be encouraged..."*

This stance positioned the brand in both conditions as in conflict with traditional values, as observed in the first pre-test, thus constituting IBA. The level of incongruence was then varied through the continuation:

- **Mild IBA condition:** “*...while also respecting the traditional and cultural values associated with them as women in Saudi Arabia.*”
- **Severe IBA condition:** “*...despite the traditional and cultural values associated with them as women in Saudi Arabia.*”

The Mild condition framed the brand as supportive yet respectful of tradition (e.g., *while also respecting*), whereas the Severe condition adopted a stronger and more direct violation of cultural norms (e.g., *despite traditional*). Additional text further reinforced this distinction:

- **Mild IBA condition:** “*This issue is about empowerment and cultural respect. We recognise that equal opportunities are important, but we also acknowledge that Saudi women have been respected for far so long due to these cultural values.*”
- **Severe IBA condition:** “*This issue is about inclusivity and equality for all, regardless of gender. Saudi women have suffered for far too long due to these cultural values and inequality.*”

To complement the verbal manipulation, a visual stimulus was included. Participants in both groups saw the same Saudi female athlete, but her attire varied according to condition:

- **Mild IBA condition:** The athlete wore a hijab, long sleeves, and modest-fitting pants, still incongruent with strict cultural expectations, yet more culturally sensitive.
- **Severe IBA condition:** The athlete appeared without a hijab, dressed in a short-sleeved (elbow-length) shirt and tighter pants ending mid-leg, thereby signalling greater incongruence with Saudi modesty norms.

All other design aspects, such as font, layout, and hashtags, were identical across conditions to ensure that only the degree of incongruence varied. Following exposure, participants completed measures of the dependent and mediating variables, along with manipulation checks and demographic items.

#### 7.4.2.2 Study 3

In Study 3, the independent variable remains IBA, manipulated at two levels: Mild vs. Severe. The experimental procedure closely mirrors that of Study 2, with participants randomly assigned to one of two conditions. As before, participants were introduced to a fictitious sports brand, FitFlex, described as a company that frequently takes public stances on controversial issues. They were then presented with a brand tweet expressing FitFlex's support for Saudi Arabia hosting music concerts and public festivals, an issue identified as value-incongruent in the first pre-test (see section 8.2.1 Pre-test 1).

The two conditions, Mild vs. Severe IBA, differed in how the brand articulated its position, while maintaining consistent branding elements, including the brand name, verified badge, five lines of text, timestamp, and engagement metrics (e.g., retweets, likes). The manipulation relied on verbal cues to distinguish the conditions, as established in pre-test 2 (see Appendix L). The opening sentence of the tweet was identical across both conditions:

"At FitFlex, we believe that supporting music and public concerts in Saudi Arabia should be done..."

The statement displays that the brand's stance in both conditions conflicts with Saudi traditions (i.e., IBA) as indicated in the first pre-test. Similarly to Study 2, the level of incongruence was then introduced through the continuity of this statement:

- **Mild IBA condition:** "...while respecting the traditional and cultural values of the community."
- **Severe IBA condition:** "...despite the traditional and cultural values of the community."

To further logicalise and reinforce the manipulation, additional text was included:

- **Mild IBA condition:** "This is about honouring Saudi culture while embracing musical diversity. We believe in the importance of promoting the arts but also believe in the importance of presenting these activists in ways that align with Saudi Arabia deeply rooted cultural values."

- **Severe IBA condition:** "This is about inclusivity and openness to global arts. Music and arts enthusiasts in Saudi Arabia have suffered for too long due to cultural restrictions and unequal access to these activities."

All other design elements (e.g., font, layout, and hashtags) were kept identical across conditions, ensuring that the only variations were in the brand's stated position. Finally, participants answered questions related to manipulation checks, dependent and mediating variables, and demographics.

#### 7.4.2.3 Study 4

Study 4 employed a 2 (IBA: mild vs. severe)  $\times$  2 (brand origin: domestic vs. foreign) between-subjects experimental design. The manipulation of IBA followed the same procedure as in Study 2, which focused on gender equality, thereby ensuring consistency across studies while introducing brand origin as an additional manipulated factor.

To operationalise brand origin, the experiment incorporated verbal cues that are well-established in prior research on brand origin effects (e.g., Davvetas et al. 2024). Participants were presented with descriptions that explicitly framed the brand as either domestic (Saudi) or foreign (American), as established in pre-test 3 (Appendix M). This distinction was reinforced through several converging elements. First, the brand was described as a Saudi or American sports brand that had been launched by a Saudi or American businessman. Second, the headquarters location was explicitly stated as either Riyadh, KSA, or New York, US. Third, the founding city was introduced as Jeddah, KSA, or San Francisco, US, further reinforcing the brand's origin narrative. Finally, the founder's name was manipulated to signal nationality, with the brand attributed to either Yazeed Al-Fada (Saudi) or Brando Powell (American).

These elements were deliberately and systematically integrated to strengthen the salience of the brand origin manipulation, ensuring that participants perceived the brand origin as a meaningful factor shaping their evaluations (Davvetas et al. 2024). Following the manipulation, participants responded to measures related to manipulation checks, dependent and mediating variables, and demographic items.

## 7.5 Recruitment Process and Sampling

A consistent recruitment process and sampling strategy were employed across all studies. Specifically, a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods (Corbin and Strauss 2014) was adopted through the author's personal networks. These approaches are particularly well-suited to the Saudi context, where personal and community-based connections remain central to research access and participant engagement (Aldossari and Calvard 2022; Aldossari and Chaudhry 2024). Unlike other contexts where online research platforms, such as MTurk or Prolific, facilitate participant recruitment, such platforms do not provide access to a sufficiently large or diverse Saudi sample. Given that this research sought to examine the impact of BA across Saudi consumers broadly, rather than targeting specific demographics or subgroups, a general population sampling strategy was employed.

According to the Saudi Communications, Space & Technology Commission, internet penetration in Saudi Arabia reached 99% in 2023, making digital platforms highly effective for participant recruitment. WhatsApp, the most widely used social media platform in Saudi Arabia, with 91% Saudis actively using it (Saudi Communications, Space & Technology Commission 2024), was therefore selected as the primary channel for distributing the research questionnaire. Its structure also allows for the creation of large community groups (e.g., family, work, study, and friends' groups), each capable of accommodating more than 500 members. By leveraging access to multiple WhatsApp communities, the study ensured broad participant outreach. For example, the author had direct access to several groups that had collectively exceeded 1,400 members. Through snowball sampling, participants were encouraged to further distribute the questionnaire within their respective communities, maximising sample diversity and representativeness.

A structured referral system was implemented to enhance systematic recruitment and mitigate potential biases. The author initially identified a set number of participants through personal networks and instructed each to complete the questionnaire and share it with at least ten additional individuals, ensuring continuous distribution. This process was repeated across all studies to minimise participant overlap and reduce the likelihood of bias toward specific subgroups (e.g., predominantly conservative participants). Eligible participants had to be Saudi nationals aged 18 or older.

One limitation of this approach was the difficulty of tracking the precise distribution of the questionnaire and estimating the total sampling frame (i.e., the number of individuals who had the opportunity to participate). Because some participants reported sharing the questionnaire in large WhatsApp communities, some exceeding 1,000 members, the study likely reached a broad and diverse audience, thereby mitigating risks of narrow selection bias.

Furthermore, given the sensitivity of the research topics, online data collection via WhatsApp provided participants with enhanced anonymity, which increased response validity and encouraged candid participation. This method also addressed cultural challenges associated with direct interactions between men and women in Saudi Arabia (Ajina et al. 2019), which are often avoided to maintain social comfort. As a male researcher, recruiting female participants, especially for discussions on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, posed logistical challenges (e.g., Ajina et al. 2019). The use of online distribution thus helped overcome these barriers, ensuring a more balanced and diverse sample.

Across all studies, a total of 1,306 individuals interacted with the questionnaire. However, only 635 participants fully completed it and passed the attention check, qualifying for inclusion in the final dataset. Specifically, Study 1 obtained 132 valid responses from 247 participants, with 97 incomplete responses and 18 failing the attention check. Study 2 secured 164 completed responses from 302 participants, with 118 incomplete responses and 20 failing the attention check. Study 3 included 146 valid responses from 318 participants, with 152 incomplete responses and 21 failing the attention check. Lastly, Study 4 yielded 193 completed responses from 376 participants, with 154 incomplete responses and 30 failing the attention check (See Table 17).

The final sample sizes met or exceeded the minimum requirements calculated using G\*Power 3.1. Specifically, Studies 1 to 3, which employed a one-factor experimental design, required a minimum sample size of 128 (effect size  $f = 0.25$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , 80% power; Xie et al. 2024). Study 4, which utilised a two-factorial design, required a minimum sample size of 179 (effect size  $f = 0.25$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , 80% power; Xie et al. 2024). Since the actual sample sizes across all studies exceeded these thresholds, the research achieved sufficient statistical power for robust and reliable analysis.

**Table 17:** Research Sampling Size

Study	N	Incomplete	Failed Attention Check	Valid response	Gender (%)
Study_1	247	97	18	132	Male (62%); Female (27%); Unknown (11%)
Study_2	302	118	20	164	Male (63%); Female (29%); Unknown (8%)
Study_3	319	152	21	146	Male (34%); Female (58%); Unknown (8%)
Study_4	377	154	30	193	Male (78%); Female (18%); Unknown (4%)
Withdrawn	61	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>Total</b>	1306		89	635	Male (60.5%); Female (32%); Unknown (7.5%)

## 7.6 Measures

All constructs were measured using established scales, with slight adaptations for the context of this study. Items for each construct were rated on a 7-point scale (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). Constructs included RVI, SIT, self-dignity, ROD coping, forgiveness coping, purchase intention, and several control variables (gender, age, issue involvement, consumer-brand stance alignment, and consumer ethnocentrism). The selection and adaptation of each scale were grounded in the conceptual definitions developed earlier, ensuring that the operational measures reflect the theoretical meaning of each construct. A summary of the constructs, items, and sources is provided in Table 18.

RVI was measured using three items adapted from Cable and DeRue (2002) and Deng et al. (2016). The three RVI items reflect the conceptualisation of RVI as a deviation between a consumer's religious principles and a brand's stance on a specific sociopolitical issue. Consistent with research defining value misalignment as the degree of divergence between consumer and brand values on a focal cause (Zhao et al. 2024), these items directly assess the extent to which participants perceive FitFlex's stance as compatible with Islamic teachings. Items such as "My religious values match with FitFlex's stance" and "FitFlex's values provide a good fit with my religious values" are designed to capture the subjective appraisal of alignment, which sits at the heart of the construct. The closer the perceived fit, the lower the deviation; conversely, lower perceived similarity indicates greater value conflict, the core meaning of RVI. In Islamic contexts, religious values function as binding commitments

rather than flexible preferences (Tetlock 2003; Halstead 2007), making similarity-fit items theoretically appropriate for capturing the degree of perceived violation.

Reverse-coding was employed which also has methodological advantages: (1) it minimises acquiescence bias by forcing respondents to cognitively process the underlying comparison, and (2) it standardises directionality across constructs in the model so that higher scores consistently indicate greater levels of the focal psychological stressor (i.e., greater perceived misalignment). This creates interpretive consistency with the theorisation that higher RVI reflects a stronger perception of religious value violation and thus greater psychological threat. Overall, the chosen items map directly onto the appraisal-based definition of RVI, where perceived divergence, not absolute religiosity or emotional reaction, is the defining feature of the construct. Because the theoretical model treats RVI as a cognitive assessment of how far a brand's activism deviates from religiously grounded moral standards, measuring perceived fit offers a valid and direct operationalisation of the construct (Deng et al. 2016).

SIT was assessed using four items adapted from Davvetas et al. (2024), including statements such as "FitFlex's tweet represents a threat to Saudi citizens" and "FitFlex's tweet disrespects the values of Saudi people." These items reflect the conceptualisation of SIT as a group-based appraisal in which consumers perceive IBA as undermining the values, reputation, or cohesion of their in-group. The phrasing intentionally references the broader collective (e.g., "Saudi people") rather than the self, thereby capturing SIT as distinct from personal-level appraisals such as dignity or religious misalignment. The items also reflect the symbolic nature of the threat highlighted in the literature, where perceived erosion of group values and moral foundations produces defensive reactions (Branscombe and Wann 1994; Stephan and Stephan 2000; Steele et al. 2002). By focusing on social disrespect, reputational harm, and identity violation, these items validly operationalise SIT as a collective appraisal that mediates consumer responses to IBA.

Self-dignity was measured using four items from Thomas and Lucas (2019), including "I feel respected by the way FitFlex addresses its social or political stances" and "FitFlex genuinely values me as a person." These items assess the degree to which participants feel recognised, respected, and valued by the brand in light of its activist stance. Thus, these items correspond directly to the conceptualisation of self-dignity as an appraisal of personal recognition, moral worth, and rightful respect in consumer-brand interactions (Sarkar 2025). Contemporary

scholarship identifies recognition, agency, and equity as core dimensions of consumer dignity (Lamberton et al. 2024), and the selected items capture these conditions by assessing whether the brand affirms the individual's identity and moral standing. The items are deliberately framed at the personal level ("I feel..."), ensuring conceptual separation from SIT, which concerns group-level threat. By focusing on perceived respect and acknowledgement, the scale reflects the mechanisms through which dignity threats provoke withdrawal, resistance, or reduced forgiveness, consistent with psychological research on defensive responses to dignity violations (Baumeister et al. 1996; Mathras et al. 2016). The measure, therefore, captures self-dignity as a personal-level appraisal influencing willingness to forgive or disengage from the brand.

ROD coping was measured using four items from Shuqair et al. (2022), such as "Consuming this brand would go against my religious principles" and "Avoiding this brand is something I take for granted." These items operationalise ROD coping as a duty-based, problem-focused behavioural strategy grounded in sacred value protection and Islamic moral obligation. Unlike emotion-focused coping, which aims to regulate internal feelings, ROD coping involves deliberate behavioural action, rejection, avoidance, or moral dissociation, taken because the consumer perceives such responses as religiously required. This behavioural framing aligns with TTSC's characterisation of problem-focused coping as an attempt to modify or avoid the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The items also reflect the Islamic doctrine of "commanding good and forbidding evil," which prescribes abstention from morally problematic actions as a minimal but essential form of religious conduct (Abosag and Farah 2014; Pieri et al. 2014). By emphasising moral wrongness, obligation, and religious principle, the items capture the doctrinal foundation of ROD coping and differentiate it clearly from RVI (a cognitive appraisal) and SIT (a collective threat appraisal). The measure, therefore, provides a valid operationalisation of the behavioural output of sacred-value violation in response to IBA.

Forgiveness coping was measured using items adapted from Xie and Peng (2009) and Davvetas et al. (2024). The combination of direct forgiveness statements (e.g., "I will forgive FitFlex") and reverse-coded items such as "I become upset when I think about FitFlex's tweet" captures the multidimensional nature of forgiveness as an emotion-focused coping strategy. By incorporating both decisional forgiveness (intentions toward future behaviour) and emotional forgiveness (reduction of negative affect), the scale aligns with contemporary

frameworks that conceptualise forgiveness as a controllable coping mechanism rather than a passive outcome (Wade and Worthington 2003; Worthington 2005; Harrison-Walker 2019; Christodoulides et al. 2021). Reverse-coded items are included to measure the reduction of negative affect that is theoretically incompatible with forgiveness (McCullough et al. 2001). This ensures that the scale captures both the presence of forgiveness and the reduction of its opposites, strengthening construct validity. Importantly, the items focus on emotional recovery rather than ideological agreement, consistent with qualitative evidence showing that consumers may forgive to restore internal equilibrium even if they continue to reject the brand's stance. The scale thus operationalises forgiveness coping as a multifaceted emotional regulation process.

The dependent variable, purchase intention, was measured using three items drawn from Putrevu and Lord (1994) and Papadopoulou et al. (2023). Items such as “It is very likely that I will buy FitFlex in the future” capture the behavioural consequences of the appraisal and coping processes theorised in this study. Prior research indicates that forgiveness, identity threat, and value incongruence directly influence willingness to maintain or sever consumer-brand relationships (Tsarenko and Tojib 2015; Fetscherin and Sampedro 2019), making purchase intention an appropriate behavioural outcome.

In addition, several control variables were included. Issue involvement was assessed using three items adapted from Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990) and Zhou et al. (2024). This variable gauges the importance of the issue to participants, with items like “It is important to me” and “It means a lot to me.” Issue involvement has shown a significant impact on consumer evaluations of sociopolitical issues (Xie et al. 2024). Including issue involvement as a control is essential because TTSC predicts that the strength of appraisal and coping responses is partly determined by personal importance, which could otherwise confound the effects of IBA severity. Highly involved individuals may react more strongly to IBA regardless of the manipulation or appraisal constructs, which would confound the interpretation of RVI, SIT, or self-dignity effects. Measuring and controlling for issue involvement ensures that observed differences in appraisal and behavioural responses reflect the theoretical constructs rather than dispositional sensitivity to the topic (e.g., gender equality or LGBTQ+ support).

Moreover, consumer ethnocentrism was measured in Study 4 using four items from Verlegh (2007) and Davvetas et al. (2024), which assess individuals' tendencies to prefer domestic over foreign products for moral, cultural, or economic reasons (e.g., "Saudis shouldn't buy foreign products because this harms the local economy"). Controlling for ethnocentrism was essential in this study because brand origin was experimentally manipulated to test whether domestic versus foreign brands differentially shape the appraisal processes (RVI, SIT, and self-dignity) in response to IBA severity. If left uncontrolled, consumers with inherently high ethnocentric tendencies might display greater loyalty toward domestic brands or harsher evaluations of foreign brands regardless of IBA severity (Davvetas et al. 2024). Such baseline attitudes could artificially inflate or obscure the moderating effect of brand origin on cognitive appraisals, thereby confounding the interpretation of the moderation pathways.

Consumer-brand stance alignment (CBA) was assessed across all studies using one item adapted from Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), Shukla et al. (2024), and Xie et al. (2024): "Are you in favour of the brand's stance?" (1 = definitely not; 4 = definitely yes). CBA is controlled because consumers' pre-existing agreement or disagreement with the issue itself is a strong predictor of emotional and behavioural responses to BA (Hydock et al. 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Without controlling for stance alignment, it would be unclear whether purchase intention is influenced by IBA severity and the appraisal mechanisms or simply by personal agreement. Including CBA ensures that the model captures the appraisal processes triggered by IBA rather than pre-existing political or moral alignment, thereby strengthening causal interpretation. For all multi-item constructs (except CBA), scores were averaged to create indices for use in data analysis.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that although negative emotions and religiosity could be theoretically relevant to consumer responses toward IBA, they were not directly modelled in the quantitative phase for several reasons. First, while the qualitative findings revealed a rich spectrum of emotional experiences, including anger, shame, discomfort, resentment, and moral disgust, these emotions frequently appeared as clusters rather than discrete affective states. Participants often expressed multiple emotions simultaneously, making it conceptually and empirically difficult to isolate the unique predictive effect of any single emotion.

Modelling multiple overlapping emotions would introduce conceptual redundancy and inflate model complexity without providing clear theoretical value, particularly in an experimental design focused on cognitive appraisals as mediators. In addition, TTSC emphasises that

emotions are downstream manifestations of appraisal processes rather than independent psychological drivers (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). For this reason, negative affect is treated as embedded within, and partially reflected by, the appraisal constructs (e.g., RVI, SIT, and dignity threat) rather than examined as a separate mediator. This decision avoids conceptual duplication and prevents overfitting in the structural model.

Second, religiosity was not included as a focal construct because the aim of the thesis is to examine appraisals of value alignment rather than individual differences in religious identity or piety. In the Saudi context, where religiosity is widespread, socially normative, and deeply intertwined with cultural identity, self-reported religiosity scale may show limited discriminatory variance across individuals. Including religiosity as a predictor would therefore contribute little explanatory power and risk capturing social desirability effects rather than meaningful individual differences. More importantly, the theoretical framework conceptualises RVI as the perception that a brand violates Islamic teachings, not as a function of how religious the person is. Thus, measuring religiosity would conflate the appraisal process with a stable trait, potentially obscuring the cognitive mechanisms through which consumers interpret IBA. For this reason, religiosity was not modelled as a mediator or moderator. Variables that could confound appraisal processes, such as consumer ethnocentrism or stance alignment, were instead controlled where theoretically necessary.

**Table 18:** Research Construct Measurement

Construct	Items	Study	Source
Religious value-incongruence (RVI)	RVI 1: My religious values match with FitFlex's stance (R)	Studies 1 & 3 &4	Cable and DeRue (2002); and Deng et al. (2016)
	RVI 2: My religious values and FitFlex's stance are very similar. (R)		
	RVI 3: FitFlex's values provide a good fit with my religious values. (R)		
Social identity threat (SIT)	SIT 1: FitFlex's tweet represents a threat to Saudi citizens.	Studies 3 &4	Davvetas et al. (2024)
	SIT 2: FitFlex's tweet gives a bad name to Saudi people.		
	SIT 3: FitFlex's tweet defames what Saudi stands for.		

	SIT 4: FitFlex's tweet disrespects the values of Saudi people.		
Self-dignity	SD 1: I feel respected by the way the FitFlex addresses its social or political stances. SD 2: I feel just as valued by FitFlex as any other consumer. SD 3: FitFlex genuinely values me as a person. SD 4: I feel treated with dignity by FitFlex's stance.	Studies 3 &4	Thomas and Lucas (2019)
Religious obligation-driven (ROD)	ROD 1: Consuming this brand would go against my religious principles. ROD 2: It would be wrong for me to continue consuming this brand. ROD 3: Avoiding this brand is something I take for granted.. ROD 4: I push myself to never consume brands that violate my religious values.	Studies 3 &4	Shuqair et al. (2022)
Forgiveness coping	FC 1: I will forgive FitFlex. FC 2: I feel resentful toward this brand. (R) FC 3: I become upset when I think about the tweet of FitFlex. (R) FC 4: I would disapprove of FitFlex (R)	Studies 3 &4	Xie and Peng (2009); and Davvetas et al. (2024)
Purchase intention	PI 1: It is very likely that I will buy FitFlex in the future. PI 2: I will purchase FitFlex the next time I need such a product. PI 3: I will definitely try FitFlex in the future.	All studies	Putrevu and Lord (1994); and Papadopoulou et al. (2023)
Attention check	Please respond to this question as "strongly agree" to ensure the quality of the responses.	All studies	Oppenheimer et al. 2009; Papadopoulou et al. 2023
Issue involvement (Control)	IN 1: Is unimportant/Is important to me. IN 2: Means nothing/Means a lot to me. IN 3: Is irrelevant/Is relevant to me.	All studies	Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990); and Zhou et al. (2024)

Consumer-brand stance alignment (Control)	CBA 1: Are you in favour of the brand's stance? on a four-point scale (1 = definitely not; 4 = definitely yes)	All studies	Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Shukla et al. (2024); and Xie et al. (2024)
Consumer ethnocentrism (Control)	CE 1: Saudis shouldn't buy foreign product because this harms the local economy and increases unemployment.	Study 4	Verlegh (2007); and Davvetas et al. (2024)
	CE 2: Even if I had to pay more I would rather buy a Saudi product.		
	CE 3: We should purchase Saudi products, otherwise we make other countries rich.		
	CE 4: A true Saudi should only buy British products.		

Notes: **RVI**= Religious value-incongruence. **SIT**= Social identity threat. **SD**= Self-dignity. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **FC**= Forgiveness coping. **PI**= Purchase intention. **IN**= Issue involvement. **CBA**= Consumer-brand stance alignment. **CE**= Consumer ethnocentrism.

## 7.7 Research Validity and Reliability

### 7.7.1 Validity

Validity concerns the extent to which the experiment measures what it is intended to measure (Bhattacherjee 2019). It refers to the degree to which a measure effectively captures the construct it is designed to represent (Bhattacherjee 2019). In evaluating validity, it is necessary to consider both theoretical and empirical dimensions.

Theoretical validity, also known as translational validity, assesses how well a theoretical construct is embodied in its operationalisation (Bhattacherjee 2019). This includes two aspects: face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to whether, on the surface, a measure appears to reasonably represent the construct under investigation (Clark et al. 2021). In this research, face validity was established through careful selection of issues that are relevant and controversial among Saudis, identified via pre-tests and supported by the literature review. This process ensured that the study context reflected realistic and appropriate forms of BA. Similarly, IBA was operationalised through brand stances that conflicted with Saudi traditions, as confirmed in the pre-tests, ensuring that the experimental stimuli (tweets) elicited a clear sense of value incongruence.

The content validity refers to whether the items capture all relevant aspects of what they are intended to measure (Bhattacherjee 2019). A key feature of BA is that the topic must be perceived as divisive and the brand must state its position explicitly (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). This was ensured in the present study through the pre-tests, which confirmed the controversial nature of the chosen issues, and through the experimental manipulations, which clearly conveyed the brand's stance. By adapting existing designs from prior BA research (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020) and presenting participants with clear and accessible statements, the manipulations were both realistic and comprehensible. Furthermore, all measurement scales were drawn from established literature and informed by the qualitative findings, thereby enhancing the likelihood that the items authentically captured their constructs.

In addition to theoretical considerations, empirical validity was also addressed. This dimension assesses the suitability of measures in relation to external criteria, often through statistical techniques such as correlational or factor analysis (Bhattacherjee 2019). In the context of this experimental design, the key requirement was to ensure that the manipulations functioned as intended. Specifically, participants needed to perceive the BA messages as incongruent with Saudi traditions and values. To verify this, manipulation checks were carried out using one-sample proportion tests (binomial tests) and t-tests to compare responses across groups. These checks were first piloted during the pre-tests and subsequently confirmed in the main study, ensuring the robustness of the experimental manipulations and the validity of the measures employed.

### **7.7.2 Hypothesis Testing Validity**

Hypothesis testing validity extends beyond the accuracy of measurement to focus on the overall experimental design (Bhattacherjee 2019). It is typically classified into internal validity and external validity.

Internal validity refers to the extent to which the observed effects can be attributed to the independent variable (e.g., IBA) rather than extraneous variables. An actual experiment requires the control of rival explanations so that causal findings can be confidently attributed to the manipulations (Clark et al. 2021). Forming distinct experimental groups (e.g., mild vs. severe conditions) helps mitigate such threats, thereby strengthening causal inference (Clark

et al. 2021). Random assignment also plays a critical role in ensuring internal validity by eliminating selection bias that might arise from systematic differences between groups (Clark et al. 2021). In this research, randomisation was implemented across all studies using Qualtrics software, ensuring that each participant had an equal chance of being assigned to any experimental condition. This process reduced the likelihood of confounding variables or alternative explanations influencing the results.

However, while randomisation is easier to implement in online settings due to automated tools, researchers must remain attentive about external factors, such as internet connectivity issues or distractions in participants' environments that could compromise the internal validity of the study. Consequently, participants were informed about the expected duration to complete the questionnaire and that genuine and accurate answers are encouraged, as there is no right or wrong answer. The survey duration information allows participants to start at their convenience, which minimises any potential environmental disruptions. Also, the true objective of the research purpose was not disclosed to reduce the threat of demand characteristics (i.e., participants alter their responses based on perceived expectations; Nichols and Maner 2008), such as participants' tendency to provide answers that confirm the hypothesis. Participants also had a period of one week to complete the questionnaire in cases of distributions, like internet connectivity issues.

To enhance realism and ecological validity, the experiments were carefully designed to mirror authentic social media activism. The stimuli were formatted as genuine tweets, including features such as a verified badge, timestamp, engagement metrics (e.g., likes, retweets), and hashtags. While online experiments enable such realism, they also require indirect strategies to ensure response quality. Attention checks were therefore incorporated into all studies to detect inattentive participants. These were designed as clear instructions within items (e.g., “Please respond to this question as ‘strongly agree’ to ensure response quality”), following established guidelines (Oppenheimer et al. 2009; Papadopoulou et al. 2023). Participants failing these checks were excluded from the analysis. Although some argue attention checks may disrupt scale validity by prompting deliberation, prior research shows they do not bias results (Huang et al. 2015; Curran 2016; Kung et al. 2018).

Another potential internal validity threat is the history effect, where observed outcomes are influenced by prior events rather than the experimental manipulation (Bhattacherjee 2019).

For instance, favourable pre-existing brand perceptions may buffer negative behavioural responses (e.g., boycotting) caused by IBA (Xu et al. 2024). To address this, a fictitious sports brand was employed across all studies, thereby reducing the risk of prior associations, familiarity, or biases (Barbarossa and Mandler 2021; Sayin et al. 2024). The sports industry was selected because it appeals broadly across demographics (e.g., age, gender), is not tied to compulsory products, and is a common sector for BA (e.g., Nike, Adidas, Patagonia). This choice thus enhanced both the plausibility and neutrality of the experimental design.

External validity concerns the extent to which findings can be generalised across populations, contexts, and time periods (Cook and Campbell 1979; Kim 2024). Online experiments enhance external validity by enabling large-scale and diverse recruitment, overcoming the geographic and resource limitations of traditional lab-based designs. This research recruited participants from the general Saudi population without targeting specific subgroups, thereby strengthening the generalisability of results.

While some may argue that the use of a fictitious brand could limit external validity, prior evidence suggests that brand familiarity does not significantly alter responses to activism (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), reflecting the suitability of using a fictitious brand and scenario. To further reinforce robustness, this thesis implemented four experiments across three distinct controversial issues (LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and music festivals). Conducting multiple studies on varied causes demonstrates that the findings are not tied to a single issue, thereby enhancing generalisability (Kim 2024). Finally, the experimental designs replicated established BA research that is validated across diverse contexts (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Ahmad et al. 2024; Zhou et al. 2024).

### **7.7.3 Reliability**

Reliability refers to the stability and consistency of measurements across different contexts, distinguishing it from validity, which focuses on accuracy (Bhattacherjee 2019). One source of reliability is ensuring clarity and simplicity in the questionnaire items. Accordingly, this research was conducted in Arabic, the native language of participants, to maximise comprehension. To ensure linguistic accuracy, a back-translation procedure was employed (Brislin 1970). Specifically, a bilingual Saudi lecturer with expertise in linguistics translated the questionnaire into Arabic, after which a second bilingual Saudi PhD lecturer translated it

back into English. The two English versions were compared, and any inconsistencies were resolved, thereby ensuring translation accuracy and conceptual equivalence (Brislin 1970).

To further confirm reliability, Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach 1951) was calculated for all scales across the four studies. Following established thresholds ( $\alpha \geq 0.70$ ) for acceptable internal consistency (Cho and Kim 2015), all measures were tested and reported in Chapter 8, thereby ensuring reliable and consistent findings across the research.

## 7.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the experimental methodology employed to investigate how Saudi consumers respond to BA, IBA, and brand origin. A series of pre-tests established the appropriateness of the chosen controversial issues, verified the manipulation of mild versus severe IBA, and ensured that participants accurately perceived the intended experimental cues. Across the four experimental studies, single-factor and factorial designs were systematically implemented to isolate and examine the causal mechanisms underlying consumer responses. The manipulations incorporated verbal and visual elements, as well as explicit brand origin cues, to reinforce the salience of experimental conditions and enhance realism. Participant recruitment through digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp, allowed the study to access a broad and diverse Saudi population while respecting cultural sensitivities and achieving the statistical power required for reliable inference.

Established scales, adapted where necessary, were employed to measure key constructs such as RVI, SIT, self-dignity, ROD, forgiveness coping, purchase intention, and relevant controls. Rigorous validation techniques, including attention check, back-translation, Cronbach's alpha reliability tests, and manipulation checks, were used to strengthen both internal and external validity. Overall, this methodological framework ensured accuracy, consistency, and robustness across the research design. By employing controlled manipulations, validated measures, and culturally appropriate recruitment strategies, the chapter established a strong empirical foundation for the subsequent analysis of consumer responses, which are presented in the following chapter. Table 19 provides a summary of the research empirical studies.

**Table 19:** Overview of The Research Empirical Studies

Phase	Study	Purpose	Method	Key Focus
<b>Qualitative</b> <b>RQ1</b>	NA	Explore how Saudi consumers interpret and respond to IBA.	22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Saudi consumers.	Eliciting context-sensitive cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and coping strategies.
<b>Quantitative</b> <b>RQ2</b>	Study 1	Establish whether BA generates significant effects in a religious and conservative context.	Experimental (2 conditions: Congruent vs. Incongruent).	Tests impact of value congruence on behavioural intention and validates relevance of impact of BA in Saudi Arabia.
	Study 2	Examine the effect of incongruence severity (mild vs. severe).	Experimental (2 conditions: Mild vs. Severe IBA).	Introduces nuanced understanding of how varying levels of IBA affect consumer response.
	Study 3	Test psychological mechanisms underlying consumer responses to IBA.		Examines mediating roles of cognitive appraisals (RVI, SIT, Self-dignity) and coping strategies (ROD, Forgiveness).
	Study 4	Investigate moderating role of brand origin (foreign vs. local).	Experimental (2x2 design: Severity × Origin).	Tests whether brand origin influences consumer appraisal and coping in response to IBA.

# Chapter 8

## Findings - Quantitative Phase

### 8.1 Introduction

The present chapter provides the results of pre-tests and four main studies that examine and analyse the Saudi consumers' responses toward BA and IBA. The chapter begins with the pre-tests that establish and validate the controversiality and incongruity of the selected issues, the severity of IBA, and experimental manipulations, such as brand origin, that are essential to test the hypotheses in subsequent studies. The first study examines the effect of congruent and incongruent BA on Saudi consumer behaviour, focusing on purchase intention and the mediating effect of RVI. The second study builds on these findings by introducing IBA (Mild vs. Severe) as a key variable and examining how different levels of incongruity affect consumers' responses. The third study then attempts to replicate and extend the second study's findings using a different controversial context (e.g., Saudi hosting musical festivals). Specifically, it explores the role of mediating variables such that the significance of cognitive appraisals (i.e., RVI, self-dignity and SIT) and coping strategies (ROD and forgiveness coping) in consumers' responses to IBA. Finally, the fourth study examines the role of a moderator variable, brand origin, in consumer responses to IBA. Each study contributes to a deeper understanding of how consumers interact with IBA, and each provides critical insight into the complex interactions of value incongruence, appraisal processes, coping strategies, and consumer responses.

### 8.2 Pre-Tests: Establishing Manipulation Validity

#### 8.2.1 Pre-Test 1

The first pre-test is designed to test two key aspects: the perceived controversiality of the BA topics, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and Saudi hosting music festivals, and the extent to which some statements about these topics were seen as congruent or incongruent with Saudi traditions. This is necessary for determining the success of the manipulation of BA and IBA.

Table 20 presents the descriptive statistics for the controversiality and value incongruence of the selected topics and stances. The mean scores for gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and Saudi hosting music festivals perceived as controversial were well above the neutral point (M

= 5.96, M = 5.72, and M 5.56, respectively), indicating strong perceptions of controversy. Regarding the alignment of these topics with Saudi traditions, the mean scores for statements regarding supporting homosexuality (M = 1.20) and Saudi hosting music festivals (M = 2.72) were considerably low, while the statement of Saudi women's participation in public sports as a conflict with Saudi tradition scored high (M = 4.80). These results confirmed that these stances resulted in a high level of incongruence with Saudi traditions (i.e., IBA).

**Table 20:** Descriptive Statistics (Pre-test 1)

Topic	N	Male %	Female %	M	SD	SE
Women's rights and roles in society (gender equality - controversiality)	25	48%	48%	5.96	1.338	0.268
LGBTQ+ rights (controversiality)				5.72	1.860	0.372
Saudi hosting music festivals (controversiality)				5.56	1.502	0.300
Supporting homosexuality <u>aligns</u> with Saudi traditions (IBA)				1.20	0.645	0.129
Hosting and organising musical festivals and public concerts <u>align</u> with Saudi traditions (IBA)				2.72	1.720	0.344
Saudi women participating in public sports, such as swimming, boxing, and running, <u>conflicts</u> with Saudi traditions (IBA)				4.80	1.658	0.332

Notes: **IBA**= Incongruent Brand Activism.

The one-sample t-test (test value = 4) confirmed the controversy of LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and Saudi hosting music festivals. Additionally, the incongruence of the statements about supporting homosexuality, Saudi hosting music festivals, and women participating in public sports was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results verified that these topics are highly controversial and perceived as conflicting with Saudi traditions. Specifically, for the controversiality aspect, the one-sample t-tests revealed that gender equality ( $t(24) = 7.325, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.47$ ), Saudi hosting music festivals ( $t(24) = 5.192, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.03$ ), and LGBTQ+ rights ( $t(24) = 4.623, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.93$ ) were perceived as significantly more controversial than neutral. These findings validated the selection of these issues as relevant and divisive topics within Saudi society.

Moreover, for the value incongruence with Saudi traditions, the statement regarding supporting homosexuality was highly incongruent with Saudi traditions ( $t(24) = -21.689, p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = -4.33$ ) as well as the statement on Saudi hosting music festivals ( $t(24) = -$

3.720,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = -0.74$ ). Similarly, the statement on women's participation in public sports (e.g., swimming) was also significantly incongruent ( $t(24) = 2.412$ ,  $p = 0.024$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.48$ ). Together, these results evidenced that the selected topics for BA were indeed controversial within Saudi society and perceived as significantly conflicting with traditional values. Given the strong evidence of controversy and incongruence, these findings provided a solid foundation for the manipulation of IBA in the main experimental study.

Table 21 illustrates further details of the one-sample t-tests.

It is worth mentioning that an Independent Samples t-test was conducted to examine whether gender (male vs. female) influenced participants' perceptions of the controversy surrounding gender equality. The results indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between males ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.679$ ) and females ( $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 0.778$ ) in their ratings,  $t(22) = -1.560$ ,  $p = .133$ , Cohen's  $d = -0.637$ . This suggested that gender did not significantly affect how controversial participants perceived this issue to be. Nonetheless, gender was kept as a covariate across all the studies to reduce any potential confounding effect.

**Table 21:** One-Sample t-Test Results for Perceived Controversiality and Incongruent Brand Activism. (Test Value = 4) (Pre-test 1)

Topic controversiality & Incongruent Statement	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% CI	Cohen's d
Women's rights and roles in society (controversiality).	7.325	24	0.001	1.96	1.41 – 2.51	1.465
LGBTQ+ rights (controversiality).	4.623		0.001	1.72	0.95 – 2.49	0.925
Saudi hosting music festivals (controversiality).	5.192		0.001	1.56	0.93 – 2.18	1.038
Supporting homosexuality aligns with Saudi traditions (IBA).	-21.69		0.001	-2.80	-3.07 – -2.53	-4.338
Saudi women participating in public sports, such as swimming, boxing, and running, conflicts with Saudi traditions (IBA).	2.412		0.024	0.80	0.12 – 1.48	0.482
Hosting and organizing musical events and public concerts align with Saudi traditions (IBA).	-3.72		0.001	-1.280	-1.99 – -0.57	-0.744

Notes: IBA= Incongruent Brand Activism.

### 8.2.2 Pre-Test 2

The purpose of the second pre-test is to measure the severity of manipulation within IBA, differentiating between Mild and Severe levels. This was tested across two controversial issues in Saudi Arabia: (1) Saudi women's participation in public sports (Studies 2 &4) and (2) Saudi Arabia's hosting of music festivals (Study 3). The manipulation varied in both textual and visual elements to differentiate between Mild and Severe IBA conditions. Table 22 displays descriptive statistics for the perceived severity of IBA by topic. The mean score for the Severe gender equality stance ( $M = 6.15$ ) was high, suggesting that the participants regard it as strongly conflicting with Saudi traditions. In contrast, the Mild gender equality stance had a substantially lower mean score ( $M = 3.36$ ), suggesting a more moderate level of perceived incongruence.

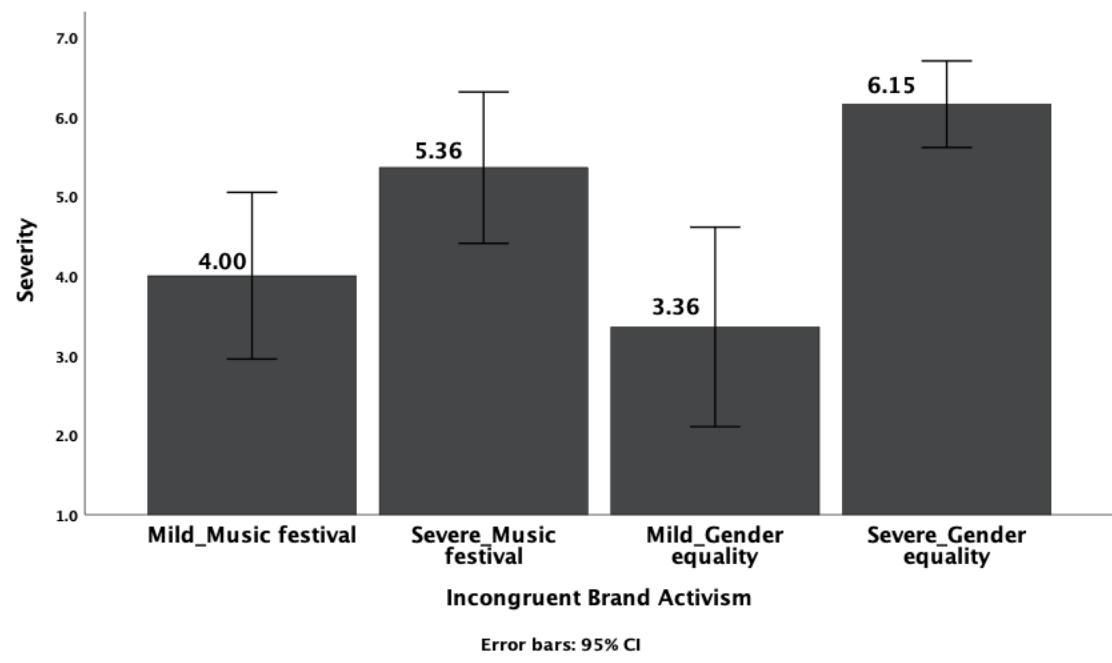
For the music festival-related stance, the Severe condition also showed a relatively high mean ( $M = 5.36$ ), reinforcing perceptions of strong incongruence. The Mild condition ( $M = 4.00$ ) remained below the Severe level but still represents a value conflict perception. These findings suggested that both gender equality and music festival stances were perceived as conflicting with Saudi traditions to varying degrees, with the severity of the stance influencing participants' perceptions. Figure 6 illustrates the mean score differences across all the conditions.

**Table 22:** Descriptive Statistics (Pre-test 2)

<b>Condition</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Male %</b>	<b>Female %</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>SE</b>
Severe IBA – Gender Equality	13	54%	46%	6.15	0.899	0.249
Mild IBA – Gender Equality	14	57%	43%	3.36	2.170	0.579
Severe IBA – Music Festivals	14	71%	29%	5.36	1.646	0.439
Mild IBA – Music Festivals	15	73%	27%	4.00	1.890	0.487
Mild IBA (Gender Equality + Music Festivals)	27	63%	37%	3.68	2.019	0.375
Severe IBA (Gender Equality + Music Festivals)	29	65.5%	34.5%	5.74	1.375	0.264
<b>Total</b>	56	64%	36%	NA	NA	NA

*Notes:* IBA= Incongruent Brand Activism.

**Figure 6:** Mean Scores Comparisons Across All Experimental Conditions (Pre-test 2)



An Independent Samples t-test was conducted to statistically verify the successful manipulation of IBA severity (see Table 23). A significant difference was found between participants exposed to the Severe and Mild IBA conditions regarding gender equality in women's sports. The results indicated that participants in the Severe IBA condition reacted more negatively compared to those in the Mild condition,  $t(25) = -4.311$ ,  $p = .001$ , with a mean difference of -2.797 and a 95% confidence interval (CI) of [-4.133, -1.461]. The effect size, Cohen's  $d = -1.66$ , suggested a significant effect, emphasising the substantial impact of Severe IBA on participants' responses. This finding highlighted the extent to which the severity of IBA on gender equality was perceived significantly differently across the two groups (Mild vs. Severe).

A similar pattern emerged in the context of Saudi Arabia hosting music festivals. Participants in the Severe IBA condition exhibited significantly more negative responses compared to those in the Mild condition,  $t(27) = -2.056$ ,  $p = .049$ , with a mean difference of -1.357 and a 95% CI of [-2.712, -0.003]. While the effect was statistically significant, the effect size was Cohen's  $d = -0.764$ , indicating a moderate-to-large effect. This suggested that while the severity of IBA in the music festival context did influence consumer responses, the impact was not as strong as in the gender equality case. A probable justification for this difference

between the topics was that in the gender equality condition, visual manipulation was included (e.g., Kim and Kim 2022). In contrast, the music festival condition was based only on verbal manipulation. This suggested that the visual manipulation further emphasised the severity of the manipulation, reflecting its effectiveness. The difference in effect sizes between the two issues could also reflect variations in public sentiment and the degree of controversy surrounding each topic.

To further confirm these findings and enhance statistical power, the two topics were combined into a single analysis, grouping Severe IBA conditions together and Mild IBA conditions together across both gender equality and music festivals. The results again demonstrated a significant difference between the Severe and Mild IBA conditions,  $t(54) = -4.409$ ,  $p = .001$ , with a mean difference of -2.051 and a 95% CI of [-2.984, -1.118]. The effect size, Cohen's  $d = -1.179$ , indicated a significant effect, reinforcing the conclusion that the severity of IBA was successfully manipulated. The combined analysis not only strengthened the robustness of the manipulation findings but also underscored the consistent pattern across distinct issues, suggesting that participants in the Severe conditions showed stronger negative IBA compared to those in Mild conditions, regardless of the specific topic.

**Table 23:** Independent Samples t-Test Results for Perceived Severity of Incongruent Brand Activism (Pre-test 2)

Experimental Condition	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% CI	Cohen's d
Gender Equality (Severe vs. Mild)	-4.311	25	.001	-2.797	[-4.133, -1.461]	-1.66
Music Festivals (Severe vs. Mild)	-2.056	27	.049	-1.357	[-2.712, -0.003]	-0.764
Severity of IBA (Gender Equality + Music Festivals)	-4.409	54	.001	-2.051	[-2.984, -1.118]	-1.179

Notes: IBA= Incongruent Brand Activism.

### 8.2.3 Pre-Test 3

The third pre-test is intended to verify the success of the experimental manipulations, ensuring that participants accurately perceive both the brand's stance and its origin as intended. This was achieved through a memory-based manipulation check for IBA conditions

and a verified measurement approach for brand origin (Sichtmann et al. 2019; Riefler 2020). By confirming that participants correctly processed these manipulations, this pre-test provided essential validation for the experimental stimuli, strengthening the reliability of the main study.

A total of N=25 (48% male) took part in this pre-test (Table 24). Since the IBA manipulation relied on categorical response options (correct or incorrect response), a one-sample proportion test (binomial test) was employed. This test helped determine if the observed accuracy of responses significantly differed from what would be expected by chance (test proportion = 50%). Results indicated that 84% of participants correctly recalled the brand's stance, a significantly higher proportion than chance ( $p = .001$ ), confirming the effectiveness of the manipulation (Table 25). When analysed separately, correct recall was 85% in the Mild incongruence condition ( $p = .022$ ) and 83% in the Severe incongruence condition ( $p = .039$ ), both significantly above chance. These findings demonstrated that participants effectively distinguished between the two activism conditions and accurately remembered the brand's message.

In addition to testing the IBA manipulation, a one-sample t-test was conducted to assess the success of the brand origin manipulation, comparing participants' responses to a test value of 4 (neutral midpoint). The results showed that participants' perception of the brand's origin was significantly above the neutral point (4),  $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ,  $t(24) = 7.73$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 1.55$ ) (Table 26). This confirmed that participants successfully identified the intended brand origin, further validating the experimental manipulation. These results confirmed that both the IBA and brand origin manipulations were successfully perceived by participants, supporting the validity of the experimental conditions.

**Table 24:** Descriptive Statistics (Pre-test 3)

Condition	N	Male %	Female %
IBA – Mild condition (Saudi Brand)	13	66%	34%
IBA – Severe condition (American Brand)	12	34%	66%
<b>Total</b>	25	48%	48%

Notes: IBA= Incongruent Brand Activism.

**Table 25:** Binomial Test Results for Manipulation Check (Pre-test 3)

Condition	Correct Responses	% Correct	Test Proportion	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Mild IBA	11/13	85%	50%	.022
Severe IBA	10/12	83%		.039
<b>Total (Combined)</b>	21/25	84%		.001

Notes: IBA= Incongruent Brand Activism.

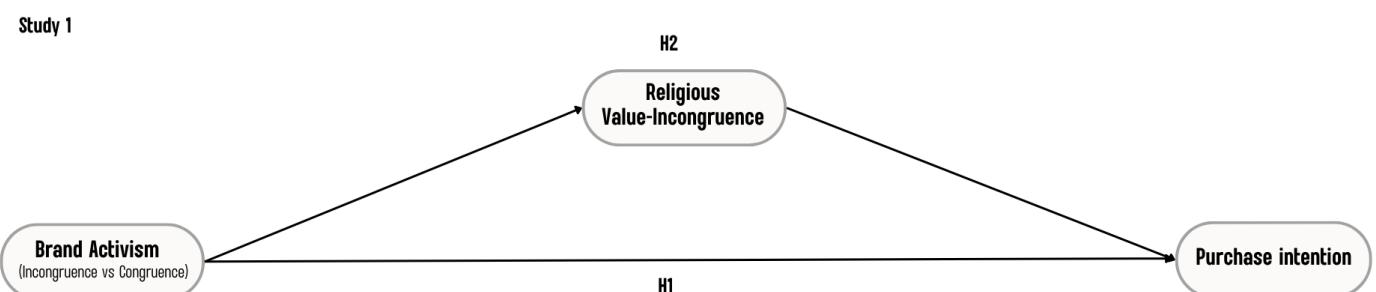
**Table 26:** One-Sample t-Test Results for Brand Origin Manipulation (Pre-test 3)

Measure	N	M	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Brand Origin	25	5.64	1.06	7.73	24	< .001	1.55

### 8.3 Study 1: The Impact of Brand Activism (Congruent vs. Incongruent Activism)

Study 1 investigates whether Saudi consumers respond to BA based on value congruence, validating qualitative findings and replicating established BA research from Western contexts. It also examines the role of RVI as a mediator influencing consumer behaviours. By confirming whether BA elicits meaningful reactions in Saudi Arabia, Study 1 establishes the foundation for subsequent studies on the negative implications of BA (i.e., IBA). Figure 7 discloses the overall conceptual model of Study 1.

This Study employed a one-factor, two-level between-subjects experimental design (Brand Activism: Congruent vs. Incongruent). Specifically, it tested BA as the independent variable, whereas purchase intention was classified as the dependent variable. Also, it investigated the role of RVI as a mediator that explains the impact of religious values on how Saudi consumers respond to BA. Before starting the analysis, data preparation and descriptive statistics are provided.

**Figure 7:** Study 1 Overall Research Model

### 8.3.1 Data Preparation and Descriptive Statistics

Before proceeding with hypothesis testing, the dataset was carefully screened to ensure its suitability for analysis. This included checking for missing values, identifying potential outliers, and assessing normality. Given that this study followed an experimental design, ensuring data integrity was essential for maintaining the validity of statistical inferences.

The total initial sample for Study 1 consisted of 247 participants. However, 97 respondents withdrew before completing the survey, and 18 failed the attention check, resulting in a final valid sample of 132 participants. These exclusions were necessary to maintain data quality and ensure that responses reflected genuine engagement with the experimental conditions. While there were no missing values for the study's key variables (i.e., RVI and purchase intention), some demographic variables, including age, gender, and education level, had 14 missing cases each. Since these demographic characteristics were not central to hypothesis testing, no imputation was performed, and analyses involving demographics were conducted on the available cases.

Outliers are described as cases that have extreme values on one or more variables, which deforms statistical analysis (Tabachnick 2013). Potential outliers were examined using Z-scores and boxplots to identify extreme values that might improperly influence the results. The analysis revealed the following: for purchase intention, the highest Z-score was 1.77, and the lowest was -1.005. For RVI, the highest Z-score was 0.83, and the lowest was -1.62. Thus, as all Z-scores fell within the conventional threshold of  $\pm 3.29$  (Tabachnick 2013), no extreme outliers were identified, and no cases were removed. Also, to further support this decision, a boxplot graphic did not indicate any extreme values, as no data points were marked as outliers (see Appendix P).

Moreover, normality of distributions is one of the main assumptions when conducting multivariate analyses. The assumption of normality can be assessed using various statistical and graphical techniques, such as Shapiro-Wilk tests, histograms, and Q-Q plots. Additionally, normality can be assessed through the calculations of skewness and kurtosis values. The skewness value indicates the “symmetry of the distribution”, whereas the kurtosis value reveals the “peakedness” of the distribution (Pallant 2020, p.58). In other words, skewness describes how uneven a distribution is and shows how much it leans to one side

instead of following a normal pattern (Cain et al. 2017). Kurtosis is a measure of the “tailedness” of a distribution and to what degree its tails differ from those of a normal distribution (Cain et al. 2017). When the values of skewness and kurtosis are equal to zero, the distribution is considered a perfect normal (Tabachnick 2013). Yet, it is expected that the scores of skewness and kurtosis will be larger or smaller than zero and still can classify the distribution as normal (Tabachnick 2013), as Pallant (2020) states that it is uncommon for social sciences research to have a value of zero for skewness and kurtosis. Furthermore, normality can be assessed through the Z-score. Specifically, Z values fall within the range of  $\pm 1.96$ , which can reflect normality of the data (Mishra et al. 2019). Thus, since the Z values of both variables fell within this range as disclosed in the previous paragraph, normality can be assumed.

The skewness and kurtosis values of the main variables in Study 1 remained within an acceptable range of  $\pm 1.4$ , indicating no severe departures from normality (see Appendix P). Specifically, the overall RVI skewness score was -0.588, and kurtosis was -1.407, which indicated a mild negative skew with a relatively flat curve. In contrast, purchase intention skewness was equal to 0.387, and kurtosis value was -1.328, suggesting a reasonable symmetry distribution with a relatively flat curve. Given that the skewness and kurtosis values did not deviate substantially from zero, it was reasonable to conclude that the data distribution met the assumptions of normality (Tabachnick 2013), supporting the use of parametric analyses for hypothesis testing.

It is important to note, however, that the mediation analyses in the current study were conducted with the PROCESS macro (Hayes et al. 2017). The PROCESS macro employs bootstrapping and does not require assumptions of normality (Hesterberg 2011). The bootstrapping process repeatedly resamples the data to generate confidence intervals for indirect effects, making it a robust approach even when normality is violated (Hayes et al. 2017). Consequently, in this research, 5,000 bootstrap samples at a 95% confidence interval were utilised to ensure that mediation effects were tested rigorously. The model verified the existence of an indirect effect if zero was not found within the lower and upper confidence intervals. This increased the validity of the findings of mediation.

Furthermore, participants' demographic information was collected to provide an overview of the sample composition (see Table 27). Due to missing values (14 cases per demographic

variable), demographic analyses were conducted based on 118 responses. Results showed that the majority were males (69.5%), with the remaining 30.5% being females. The highest number for the age range was the 18-27 years old (36.4%), followed by the 28-34 years old (33.1%), and the lowest being those above 60 (0.8%). Educationally, nearly half of the participants (48.3%) had a bachelor's degree, with 28.0% and 10.2% of the participants having a master's degree and a doctorate, respectively. The data also showed that younger respondents (18-27) were more likely to have a bachelor's degree, whereas older segments (35 and above) were more likely to have postgraduate degrees. These demographic characteristics aligned with the broader Saudi population, where statistics showed that the majority of Saudis are under 30 (General Authority for Statistics 2024). Overall, data screening confirmed that the dataset met the necessary conditions for parametric testing. There were no extreme outliers, and skewness and kurtosis values fell within an acceptable range. Given these findings, subsequent analyses proceeded using parametric statistical tests.

**Table 27:** Demographic Characteristics of The Sample (Study 1)

<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	82	69.5
Female	36	30.5
<b>Age Group</b>		
18 - 27	43	36.4
28 - 34	39	33.1
35 - 43	26	22.0
44 - 59	9	7.6
60 or Older	1	0.8
<b>Education Level</b>		
High School Diploma	16	13.6
Bachelor's Degree	57	48.3
Master's Degree	33	28.0
Doctorate Degree	12	10.2

### 8.3.2 Reliability and Validity Checks

To ensure the solidity of Study 1, validity and reliability were both assessed using a range of different statistical techniques. Validity was examined through manipulation checks through a one-sample proportion test (binomial test) to determine whether participants accurately processed the brand's stance in each experimental condition (congruence vs. incongruence). Further, attention checks were included in order to warrant participant engagement and data

quality, ensuring that only attentive responses were retained for analysis. Meanwhile, reliability was assessed with Cronbach's alpha, which checked the internal consistency of key constructs like RVI and purchase intention. The scales collectively increased the validity of the results and confirmed the appropriateness of the experimental manipulations.

The manipulation check results demonstrated strong validity, with 92% of participants correctly recalling the brand's stance, significantly exceeding the chance level of 50% ( $p < .001$ , binomial test; Table 28). This confirmed that participants successfully processed the experimental manipulations and that the brand's activism stance was effectively communicated. Attention checks further reinforced data quality, with responses that did not pass the check being discarded from analysis.

**Table 28:** Manipulation Check – Binomial Test Results (Study 1)

Category	N	Observed Proportion	Test Proportion	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Correct Recall	121	0.92	0.50	0.001
Incorrect Recall	11	0.08		
<b>Total</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>1.00</b>		

The reliability analysis yielded highly acceptable results. Cronbach's alpha for purchase intention was 0.967, while RVI also demonstrated high internal consistency, scoring 0.969. Both values substantially exceeded the widely accepted score of 0.70 (Cho and Kim 2015), indicating strong internal consistency across items. Besides, inter-item correlations were high for both purchase intention (ranging from .0888 to 0.945) as well as RVI (ranging from 0.896 to 0.924), reinforcing the coherence of the scale.

Altogether, these findings affirmed the validity and reliability of Study 1, confirming that participants correctly interpreted the experimental conditions and that the measured constructs exhibited strong internal consistency. With these assurances in place, the study can confidently proceed to hypothesis testing, ensuring that any observed effects were attributable to the experimental manipulations rather than measurement inconsistencies.

### 8.3.3 Hypothesis Testing

#### 8.3.3.1 The Effect of Brand Activism on Purchase Intention (H1)

To test H1, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare purchase intention between participants exposed to congruent versus incongruent BA conditions. As illustrated in Table 29, participants who viewed a congruent BA message ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ) exhibited significantly higher purchase intention compared to those exposed to an IBA message ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). The difference was statistically significant,  $t(119.47) = 11.919$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 2.07$ ).

**Table 29:** Independent Samples t-Test Results for Brand Activism Congruence (Study 1; H1)

Condition	N	M	SD	t (df = 119.47)	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Cohen's d
Congruent Activism	67	4.69	1.72	11.919	< .001	(2.58, 3.61)	2.07
Incongruent Activism	65	1.59	1.23				

It is important to note that Levene's test for equality of variances was significant ( $F = 7.954$ ,  $p = .006$ ), indicating a violation of the homogeneity of variances assumption. In such cases, it is recommended to use Welch's t-test (equal variances not assumed) ( Delacre et al. 2017). Nonetheless, the results confirmed the robustness of the effect, demonstrating that BA significantly influences Saudi consumers' purchase decisions based on value congruence.

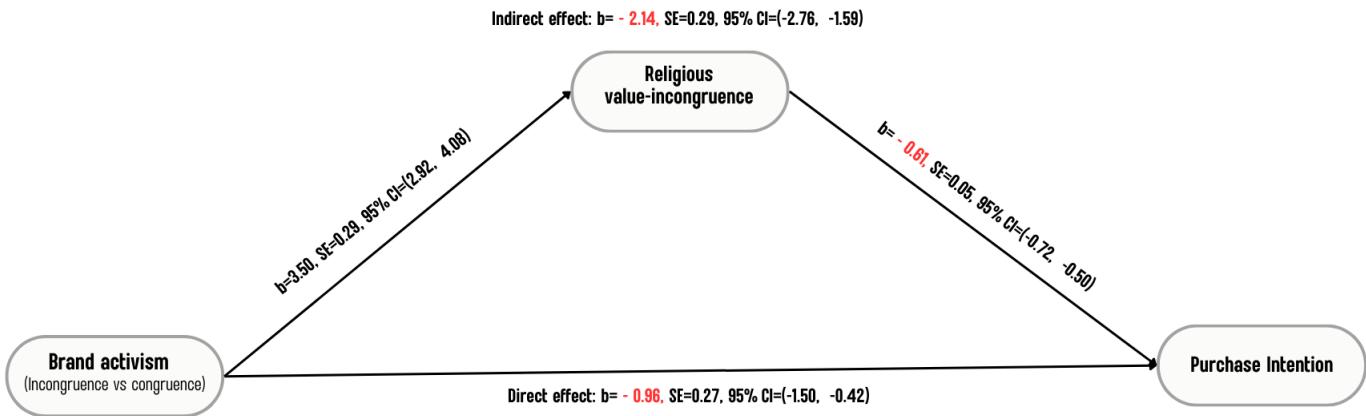
#### 8.3.3.2 The Mediating Role of Religious Value Incongruence (H2)

To test H2, Hayes' PROCESS Model 4 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% confidence intervals) was used to examine whether RVI mediates the relationship between BA and purchase intention (Table 30). The results indicated that the BA condition significantly predicts RVI,  $b = 3.50$ ,  $SE = .295$ ,  $t(130) = 11.86$ ,  $p < .001$ , confirming that incongruent BA triggers stronger perceptions of RVI. In turn, RVI significantly predicted purchase intention,  $b = -0.61$ ,  $SE = .056$ ,  $t(129) = -10.86$ ,  $p < .001$ , demonstrating that higher RVI decreased purchase intention (Figure 8).

Importantly, when controlling for RVI, the direct effect of BA on purchase intention remained significant but was substantially reduced ( $b = -0.96$ ,  $SE = 0.273$ ,  $t(129) = -3.50$ ,  $p =$

.0006), indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect of BA on purchase intention through RVI was statistically significant,  $b = -2.14$ , BootSE = 0.296, BootCI [-2.76, -1.59], supporting H2.

**Figure 8:** Mediation Analysis Chart (Study 1; H2)



**Table 30:** Mediation Analysis Results (Study 1; H2)

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)
BA → RVI	3.50	.295	11.86	< .001	(2.92, 4.08)
RVI → Purchase Intention	-0.61	.056	-10.86	< .001	(-0.72, -0.50)
BA → Purchase Intention (Total Effect)	-3.10	.261	-11.86	< .001	(-3.61, -2.58)
BA → Purchase Intention (Direct Effect)	-0.96	.273	-3.50	.0006	(-1.50, -0.42)
Indirect Effect (BA → RVI → Purchase Intention)	-2.14	.296	-	-	(-2.76, -1.59)

Notes: BA significantly reduces purchase intention primarily through increased RVI. The significant indirect effect and reduced direct effect indicate partial mediation, supporting H2.

BA= Brand activism. RVI= Religious value-incongruence.

Moreover, to further validate the findings, an additional PROCESS Model 4 analysis was conducted, controlling for gender, age category, education level, issue involvement, and CBA. The results remained robust, with the indirect effect of BA on purchase intention through RVI still statistically significant ( $b = -1.04$ , BootSE = 0.246, BootCI [-1.60, -0.62]) (see Appendix O; Table A). Given that the inclusion of these covariates did not substantially alter the mediation effect, this reinforces the validity and generalisability of the findings.

### 8.3.4 Study 1 Discussion and Summary

Study 1 provides strong evidence that BA leads to different consumer reactions based on value congruence, supporting the previous qualitative findings and BA literature (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; D'Arco et al. 2024). More specifically, participants demonstrated a significantly greater intention to purchase when the brand's position aligned with the values of Saudi traditions (i.e., congruent BA). Conversely, when the brand position conflicted with Saudi values (i.e., IBA), purchase intentions declined significantly. These results empirically support H1, demonstrating that value congruence is a powerful driver of consumer behaviour in this context.

Crucially, H2 was also strongly supported, and RVI proved to be a potent mediator of the BA and purchase intention relationship. This indicates Saudi consumers view IBA from a religious perspective, and it has a negative effect on their willingness to engage with the brand. Mediation analysis confirmed that IBA significantly increased perceptions of RVI, which then substantially reduced purchase intention. Even when controlling for RVI, the direct effect of BA on purchase intention remained significant but notably weaker, indicating that RVI accounts for a significant portion, but not the entirety, of the BA effect. This means that IBA still generates negative outcomes across Saudi consumers when it contradicts their traditions, regardless of whether the brand's stance is perceived as in conflict with their religious values or not.

The findings contribute significantly to both theoretical and contextual domains. Initially, they show that the BA construct is pertinent and robust in Saudi Arabia, despite being primarily studied in Western contexts. Study 1 highlights RVI as a crucial evaluation criterion, underscoring the importance of religion and culture, in contrast to earlier studies that have primarily examined BA through political or identity lenses (Saluja and Chan 2025).

Finally, Study 1 underscores the importance of examining IBA independently. The findings revealed that when a brand engages in activism perceived as incongruent with religious and cultural values, it highly reduced their purchase intention. While this study did investigate the psychological interpretations of IBA (e.g., cognitive appraisals and coping strategy), it confirmed that IBA results in adverse outcomes. This study calls for a deeper inspection of how consumers perceive, appraise, cope, and respond to IBA, which provides the foundation

for the following studies (Studies 2 to 4), which examine these underlying processes and coping strategies.

#### **8.4 Study 2: The Severity of Incongruent Brand Activism (Mild vs. Severe)**

Building on the findings of Study 1, which established the effect of IBA on Saudi consumers' behavioural intention, Study 2 extended the research by examining whether all forms of IBA elicited equally negative reactions. Study 1 established that in the event of BA conflicting with Saudi traditional values, purchase intention was diminished, with RVI critically mediating this process. However, the extent to which the severity of IBA (Mild vs. Severe) influences consumer responses remains an open question. Hence, Study 2 aims to fill this gap by introducing the concept of IBA to assess whether variations in the level of incongruence in BA lead to different consumer responses. Figure 9 illustrates Study 2 overall research model.

Rather than treating BA as a binary construct (congruent or incongruent), Study 2 compares Mild and Severe IBA, recognising that the strength of a brand's stance may affect consumer responses in varying ways. Specifically, this study examines whether Severe IBA increases negative responses, while Mild IBA receives less resistance and therefore weaker negative responses (H3). Thereby, Study 2 provides a more nuanced understanding of how the dark side of BA manifests, further clarifying the mechanisms underlying consumer resistance to brands engaging in controversial issues.

To explore these relationships empirically, Study 2 employed a one-factor, two-level between-subjects experimental design (Incongruent Brand Activism: Mild vs. Severe). This design enabled systematic comparison of consumer responses at varying levels of IBA, contributing to the current BA literature with new evidence on the role of IBA severity in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours.

**Figure 9:** Study 2 Overall Research Model



### 8.4.1 Data Preparation and Descriptive Statistics

A similar process of data screening and preparation of Study 1 was followed in Study 2. Specifically, the data was checked for missing values, potential outliers, and normality. The overall sample size for Study 2 consists of 302 participants. Nonetheless, 118 respondents dropped off before completing the questionnaire, and 20 failed the attention check, resulting in a final valid sample of 164 participants. These sampling eligibilities were essential to provide high data quality that reflects such genuine and attentive engagement with the experimental conditions.

The results showed no missing values across the study's primary variable (i.e., purchase intention). However, some demographic variables, such as age, gender, and education level, had 14 missing cases each. As these demographic characteristics were not part of the hypothesis testing, no imputation was implemented, and analyses including demographic variables were conducted on the available cases.

To test for the outliers, Z-scores and boxplots were employed (Appendix Q). The analysis disclosed that for purchase intention, the highest Z-score was 1.86, and the lowest was -1.50. Tabachnick (2013) states that Z-scores that fall outside the conventional range of  $\pm 3.29$  may be considered as a potential outlier. Thus, it can be inferred that no extreme outliers were identified. Also, to further support this conclusion, a boxplot graphic was used. The boxplot indicates extreme outliers through an asterisk, whereas mild outliers are presented with a small circle (Pallant 2020). Hence, a boxplot graphic (Appendix Q) shows that no data points were marked as outliers.

Following the procedure in Study 1, the normality of data distributions in Study 2 was assessed through the calculations of skewness and kurtosis values. According to Tabachnick (2013), skewness and kurtosis values should be close to zero to indicate an approximately normal distribution. The skewness and kurtosis values for purchase intention remained within acceptable ranges, suggesting no severe violations of normality (Appendix Q). Specifically, purchase intention exhibited a skewness of -0.130 and a kurtosis of -1.082, suggesting a near-symmetrical distribution with a relatively flat curve. These findings, therefore, indicated that the distributions of purchase intention approximate normality, reinforcing the appropriateness of parametric analyses for further statistical testing.

To provide an overview of the research sample, participants' demographic information is reported in Table 31. Due to missing values (14 cases per demographic variable), demographic analyses were conducted based on 150 responses. The majority of participants were male (68.7%), while 31.3% were female. In terms of age distribution, the largest proportion of respondents fell within the 28–34 age group (42.7%), followed by those aged 35–43 years (25.3%). A smaller percentage of participants belonged to the 18–27 age group (22.0%), while only 0.7% were aged 60 or older.

Regarding educational background, nearly half of the participants (49.3%) reported holding a bachelor's degree, whereas 28.7% had a master's degree and 14.7% had a doctorate. A smaller segment (7.3%) consisted of high school graduates. Notably, younger participants (18–27 years old) were more likely to hold bachelor's degrees, while postgraduate qualifications (master's and doctorate degrees) were more prevalent among older respondents (35 and above). These demographic patterns aligned with data from Study 1, where national statistics indicate that a significant portion of the population is under the age of 30 (General Authority for Statistics 2024).

**Table 31:** Demographic Characteristics of The Sample (Study 2)

<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	103	68.7
Female	47	31.3
<b>Age Group</b>		
18 - 27	33	22.0
28 - 34	64	42.7
35 - 43	38	25.3
44 - 59	14	9.3
60 or Older	1	0.7
<b>Education Level</b>		
High School Diploma	11	7.3
Bachelor's Degree	74	49.3
Master's Degree	43	28.7
Doctorate Degree	22	14.7

#### 8.4.2 Reliability and Validity Checks

To perform such a robust analysis of Study 2, both validity and reliability were evaluated through established statistical techniques, consistent with the method taken in Study 1. The validity of the experimental manipulations was assessed via a manipulation check using a one-sample proportion test (binomial test), confirming whether participants accurately elicited the brand's stance in each condition (Mild vs. Severe incongruence). Additionally, attention checks were applied to enhance data quality by ensuring that only engaged participants were included in the final dataset. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to measure the internal consistency of purchase intention.

The manipulation check results confirmed strong validity, with the majority of participants correctly recognising the brand's stance in both conditions. As shown in Table 32, 73% of participants in the Severe condition and 96% in the Mild condition correctly recalled the brand's message, both significantly exceeding the chance level of 50% ( $p < .001$ , binomial test). These findings confirmed that the manipulation was successfully perceived by participants, reinforcing the credibility of the experimental design. For the scale reliability, Cronbach's alpha scores for purchase intention revealed strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.948$ ), exceeding the commonly accepted value of 0.70 (Cho and Kim 2015).

Overall, the findings above provided robust evidence of the validity and reliability of Study 2. The high accuracy rates in the manipulation check confirmed that participants successfully processed the experimental conditions, while the strong Cronbach's alpha score affirmed the internal consistency of the key construct. With these results in place, the study can proceed with confidence to test the hypothesis.

**Table 32:** Manipulation Check – Binomial Test Results (Study 2)

Condition	Category	N	Observed Proportion	Test Proportion	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Severe	Incorrect	22	0.27	0.50	0.001
	Correct	61	0.73		
Mild	Incorrect	3	0.04		
	Correct	78	0.96		
<b>Total</b>		164	1.00		

### 8.4.3 Hypothesis Testing

This section presents the results of hypothesis testing, examining the effects of IBA severity on purchase intention. To test the proposed hypotheses, an independent samples t-test was conducted to assess the direct effect of IBA severity on purchase intention (H3).

#### 8.4.3.1 The Effect of IBA Severity on Purchase Intention (H3)

The third hypothesis (H3) proposed that the severity of IBA would negatively affect purchase intention, such that consumers exposed to Severe IBA would report lower purchase intention compared to those exposed to Mild IBA. An independent samples t-test confirmed this hypothesis. Participants in the Severe IBA condition reported significantly lower purchase intention ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than those in the Mild IBA condition ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ). The difference was statistically significant,  $t(162) = 5.573$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.87$ ), indicating that IBA severity strongly influences consumer behaviour (Table 33).

These findings reinforced the value-alignment impact in BA research, which suggested that when a brand's stance conflicts with consumer values, it leads to negative behavioural responses such as purchase avoidance (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). However, this study provided new insight by demonstrating that not all instances of IBA elicit equally negative outcomes. Although Severe IBA resulted in a marked decline in purchase intention, the relatively higher purchase intentions in the Mild IBA condition suggested that some consumers may adopt coping strategies, such as forgiveness, that mitigate the negative effects of misalignment.

**Table 33:** Independent Samples t-Test Results for IBA Severity and Purchase Intention (Study 2)

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t (df = 162)	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Cohen's d
Mild IBA	81	4.41	1.64	5.573	< .001	(0.92, 1.93)	0.87
Severe IBA	83	2.98	1.63				

Notes: IBA= Incongruent brand activism.

#### 8.4.4 Study 2 Discussion and Summary

Study 2 extended Study 1's findings by investigating whether Saudi consumers' purchase intentions varied based on the level of IBA. Though Study 1 had established IBA to weaken purchase intention due to cultural and religious value incongruences, it was examining IBA as a binary construct, either absent or present. In contrast, Study 2 offered a more nuanced view through the comparison of Mild vs. Severe forms of IBA, allowing for a deeper understanding of consumer responses toward IBA.

The results supported the hypothesis (H3), revealing that Severe IBA led to significantly lower purchase intentions than Mild IBA. This suggests that the degree of misalignment between a brand's activism and consumers' religious and cultural values critically shapes behavioural outcomes. The large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.87$ ) confirmed that IBA severity was a powerful determinant of consumer response.

Importantly, this study contributes new insight to the BA literature by showing that not all forms of value-incongruent activism are equally damaging. While Severe IBA elicited strong resistance, those who were subjected to Mild IBA had relatively high purchase intentions ( $M = 4.41$ ). The results showed that IBA is not necessarily an absolute negative reaction. Instead of a "support or reject" dichotomy, the degree of incongruence becomes critical.

With Mild IBA, consumers will likely react less negatively, which raises the question of whether some consumers may even override their ideological incongruence, such as forgiving the brand, in order to maintain their relationship with the brand. Hence, these findings suggest the need for further investigation regarding consumers' cognitive appraisals and coping mechanisms when confronting cases of IBA severity, which may explain the potential buffer against the impact of mild incongruence (see Study 3).

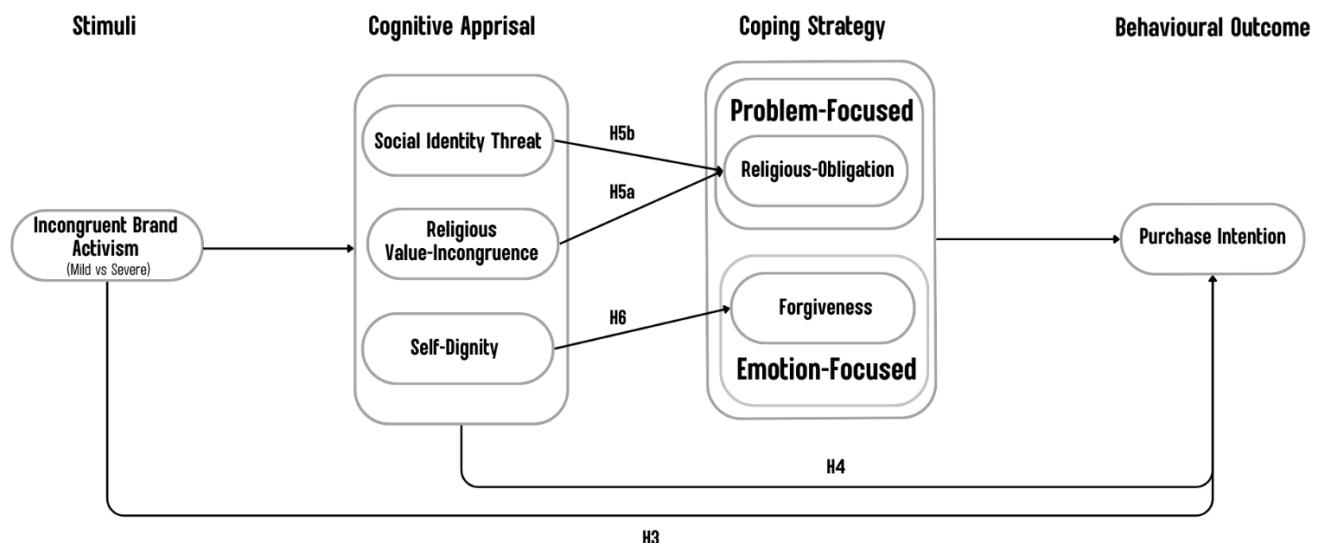
By introducing and empirically grounding the construct of IBA severity, Study 2 builds a theoretical understanding regarding how consumers are processing the dark side of BA. Study 2 also provides a critical foundation for Studies 3 and 4, which examine the psychological processes (e.g., cognitive appraisals) and coping mechanisms underlying the reasons why specific consumers are more negative than others in reaction to IBA.

## 8.5 Study 3: The Mediating Role of Cognitive Appraisals and Coping Strategies

Study 3 aims to generalise the findings of Study 2 to a new contentious issue, Saudi Arabia's hosting of public festivals and music concerts. This issue represents an intense cultural shift and remains controversial, making it a suitable topic in which to generalise the findings of Study 2. Hence, by experimentally testing a new form of IBA, Study 3 enhances the validity and generalisability of Study 2 findings by ensuring that consumer responses are not particular to only one type of controversy. Apart from replication, Study 3 further expands the scope of the research by examining the mediating roles of cognitive appraisals, including RVI, SIT, and self-dignity, as well as coping strategies, such as ROD and forgiveness coping. Although Study 2 validated that IBA influences purchase intention, it remains unclear why consumers in mild vs. severe conditions reacted differently.

Therefore, Study 3 tests how the evaluation of IBA through different cognitive appraisals, RVI, SIT, and self-dignity, influences consumer responses to IBA. Also, it expands the analysis by incorporating coping strategies as a second mediating mechanism. It seeks to investigate how consumers cope when confronted with varying levels of IBA. Specifically, this study investigates problem-focused coping (e.g., ROD coping) and emotion-focused coping (e.g., forgiveness coping) to determine how consumers navigate and mitigate the psychological tension resulting from IBA. By including both the cognitive appraisals and coping strategies as mediators, Study 3 provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Saudi consumers' behavioural response to IBA. Figure 10 depicts the overall research model of Study 3.

**Figure 10:** Study 3 Overall Research Model



### 8.5.1 Data Preparation and Descriptive Statistics

To ensure data consistency and quality, Study 3 replicated the same data preparation and screening procedures employed by Studies 1 and 2. Specifically, the dataset was screened for missing values, outliers, and normality violations. Study 3 had an initial sample size of 318 participants. Nevertheless, 152 of the participants dropped out prior to completing the survey, while 21 of the participants were eliminated on failing the attention check, leaving a final valid sample of 145 participants. Appendix R presents a summary of descriptive statistics of Study 3.

The results showed that no missing values exist among the key variables of the study (i.e., RVI, ROD, forgiveness coping, purchase intention, SIT, and self-dignity). However, in line with the results of previous studies, missing cases existed for demographic variables such as age, gender, and education. Since demographic characteristics were not applied to hypothesis testing, imputation was not applied and analysis using demographics employed available cases.

Z-scores and boxplots were checked to identify any possible outliers. As presented in Appendix R, all the key variables had Z-scores within the normal range of  $\pm 3.29$  (Tabachnick 2013), and no outliers existed. In addition, boxplot analysis further confirmed the absence of outliers, warranting dataset reliability for further statistical analysis (Appendix R).

As with Study 2, normality was established based on skewness and kurtosis values (Appendix R). As was evident, all of the primary variables were within proper ranges, confirming no significant normality violations. Specifically, purchase intention had a skewness of 0.18 and a kurtosis of -0.90, indicating a nearly symmetrical distribution. Forgiveness had a skewness of 0.22 and a kurtosis of -0.75, whereas RVI had a skewness of -0.89 and a kurtosis of -0.45. The same, ROD had a skewness of -0.51 and a kurtosis of -0.05, SIT had a skewness of -0.30 and a kurtosis of -0.90, and self-dignity had a skewness of 0.31 and a kurtosis of -0.63. These indicate that data distributions were close to normality, making the utilisation of parametric analyses possible for further testing of hypotheses. In general, screening of data ensured that Study 3's dataset was not problematic with missing values in key variables, outliers, and extreme departures from normality. Such results confirmed the stability of subsequent statistical analyses and advocate for the consistency of data preparation for Study 3.

Finally, Table 34 describes the demographic information of the participants. Due to missing data (12 cases per demographic variable), demographic analyses were conducted on 133 responses. The majority of participants were female (63%), and 37% were male. By age distribution, the largest percentage of respondents were in the 18–27 age group (38.3%), followed by the 28–33 years age group (30.8%). Fewer participants were in the 35–43 age group (18.8%), and only 3.7% were 60 years and older. Regarding educational level, most of the respondents (63.2%) reported having a bachelor's degree, followed by 21.1% with a master's degree and 11.3% with a high school diploma. A smaller segment (4.5%) had a doctorate. This population information is consistent with similar data demographics from Studies 1 and 2, with a large percentage of the sample around 30 years of age, in line with the Saudi demographic statistics (General Authority for Statistics 2024).

**Table 34:** Demographic Characteristics of The Sample (Study 3)

Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	49	36.84
Female	84	63.16
<b>Age Group</b>		
18 - 27	51	38.3
28 - 34	41	30.8
35 - 43	25	18.8
44 - 59	11	8.3
60 or Older	5	3.8
<b>Education Level</b>		
High School Diploma	15	11.3
Bachelor's Degree	84	63.2
Master's Degree	28	21.1
Doctorate Degree	6	4.5

### 8.5.2 Reliability and Validity Checks

To ensure the robustness of Study 3, both validity and reliability were tested under conventional statistical practices, just as was accomplished in Studies 1 and 2. However, to further strengthen the validity of the experiment manipulation, Study 3 employed a second check for manipulation together with the one-sample proportion test (binomial test). This second manipulation was included to directly measure participants' perception of IBA severity, enhancing the precision of the manipulation verification. An attention check was also included to ensure data quality by only permitting attentive responses into the final dataset. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to test the internal consistency of the primary constructs, including purchase intention, forgiveness, RVI, ROD, SIT, and self-dignity.

As in Studies 1 and 2, the first manipulation check utilised a binomial test to determine whether participants correctly identified the brand's stance. As shown in Table 35, the results indicated that the proportion of participants recalling the brand position was significantly high and was 85% for the Severe condition, as well as 97% for the Mild condition, which were both considerably higher than the 50% chance level ( $p < .001$ ). Results guaranteed that the participants adequately processed the experimental manipulation.

**Table 35:** Manipulation Check – Binomial Test Results (Study 3)

Condition	Category	N	Observed Proportion	Test Proportion	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Severe	Incorrect	11	0.15	0.50	0.001
	Correct	62	0.85		
Mild	Incorrect	2	0.03		
	Correct	70	0.97		
<b>Overall</b>	<b>Total</b>	145	1.00		

To further enhance the validity of the manipulation and address potential limitations associated with memory-based recall questions, a second perception-based manipulation check was included. The second manipulation check aimed to capture participants' perception of IBA severity. Participants responded to the following statement: "The tweet by the brand FitFlex aligns with Saudi traditions" on a scale from 1 to 7. Responses were reverse-coded, and higher scores indicated a greater perception of incongruence severity. As expected, participants in the Severe condition reported higher scores ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) than those

in the Mild condition ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ). Moreover, an independent samples t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant,  $t(143) = -12.73$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 1.54$ ), further validating the success of the experimental manipulation (Table 36).

**Table 36:** Perception-Based Manipulation Check (Independent Samples t-Test; Study 3)

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t(df = 143)	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Cohen's d
Mild IBA	72	2.88	1.68	-12.73	< .001	(-3.75, -2.74)	1.54
Severe IBA	73	6.12	1.38				

Notes: IBA= Incongruent brand activism.

Cronbach's alpha was applied to assess internal consistency within the primary constructs. As evident from Table 37, all variables demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the commonly accepted cut-point of 0.70 (Cho and Kim 2015). Particularly, purchase intention ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), forgiveness ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ), RVI ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), ROD ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ), SIT ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), and self-dignity ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ) all were found to have high internal consistency, demonstrating that the measurement scales were reliable. Overall, these findings were strong evidence of the validity and reliability of Study 3. The manipulation checks confirmed that participants successfully processed the experimental conditions, and the high Cronbach's alpha values ensured the internal consistency of the main constructs. The validity and reliability results, therefore, enabled the study to proceed with confidence in testing the proposed hypotheses.

**Table 37:** Reliability Analysis – Cronbach's Alpha (Study 3)

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Purchase Intention	3	0.92
Forgiveness coping	4	0.91
Religious Value-Incongruence (RVI)	3	0.96
Religious Obligation-driven coping (ROD)	4	0.84
Social Identity Threat (SIT)	4	0.92
Self-Dignity	4	0.90

### 8.5.3 Hypothesis Testing

This section presents the results of the hypothesis tests, examining the effects of IBA severity on purchase intention and the mediating roles of RVI, SIT, self-dignity, ROD coping (problem-focused coping), and forgiveness coping (emotion-focused coping). As one of the main objectives of Study 3 is to replicate and validate the findings of Study 2 in a new context (i.e., Saudi hosting music festivals), the previous proposed hypothesis (H3) along with the additional hypotheses (H4-H6) were examined. To test the proposed hypotheses, an independent samples t-test was conducted to test the direct impact of IBA severity on purchase intention (H3). Direct and serial mediation analyses using Hayes' PROCESS Model 4 and 6 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% confidence intervals) were conducted to examine the direct and sequential mediating paths (H4-H6).

#### 8.5.3.1 The Effect of IBA Severity on Purchase Intention (H3)

H3 predicted that the severity of IBA would have a negative influence on purchase intention, with participants exposed to Severe IBA having lower purchase intentions than those in the Mild IBA condition. To test this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was employed to compare purchase intention scores between the two groups. Results showed a statistically significant difference in purchase intention between participants in the Severe and Mild IBA conditions. In particular, the Severe IBA group reported significantly lower purchase intention ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) than the Mild IBA group ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ). The difference was statistically significant,  $t(143) = 7.428$ ,  $p < .001$ , and with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 1.23$ ), demonstrating that consumer behaviour was significantly influenced by the severity of IBA (Table 38).

These findings verified the hypothesis that when a brand's activism contradicts consumers' traditional values, it invokes strong negative behaviour responses, such as reduced purchasing intention (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). Similar to Study 2, however, the findings indicated that Mild IBA did not result in the same degree of impact as Severe IBA. This suggests that with lower perceived incongruence (i.e., Mild condition), consumers may employ coping mechanisms, such as forgiveness, that lessen the negative impacts of misalignment and continue involvement with the brand. Thus, the results confirmed and enhanced the findings of Study 2 that the severity of IBA affects how consumers react in the face of IBA.

**Table 38:** Independent Samples t-Test Results for IBA Severity and Purchase Intention (Study 3)

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t (df = 143)	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Cohen's d
Mild IBA	72	4.29	1.54				
Severe IBA	73	2.48	1.38	7.428	< .001	(1.32, 2.28)	1.23

Notes: IBA= Incongruent brand activism.

#### 8.5.3.2 The Mediating Role of Cognitive Appraisals (H4)

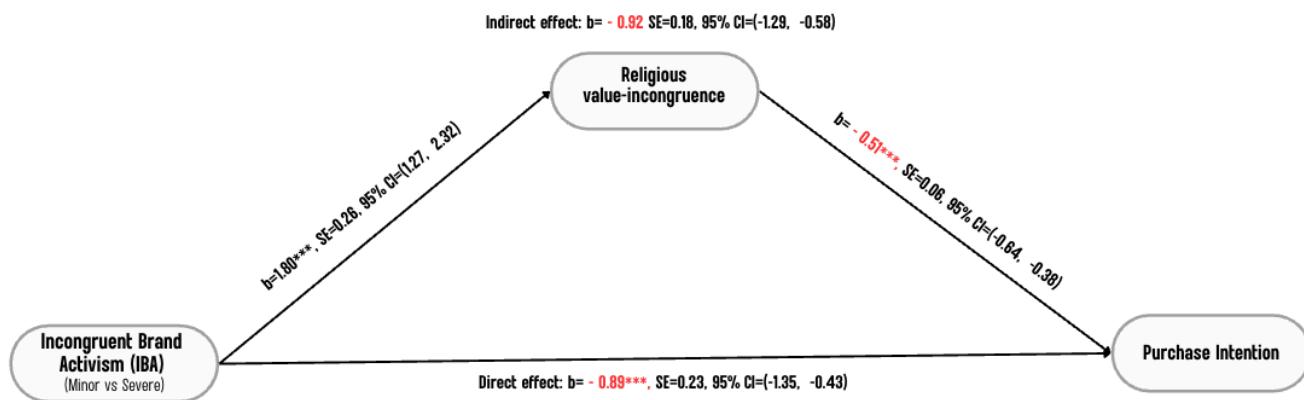
##### a) Religious Value Incongruence (H4a)

H4a posited that exposure to Severe IBA would lead to higher perceived RVI than Mild IBA, and that higher RVI would lead to lower purchase intention. A direct mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 supported the hypothesis. Participants in the Severe IBA showed higher RVI than the Mild IBA group ( $b = 1.80$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ ,  $t(143) = 6.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and RVI also negatively impacted purchase intention ( $b = -0.51$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(142) = -7.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming H4a (Figure 11).

Furthermore, the indirect effect of IBA severity on purchase intention through RVI was statistically significant ( $b = -0.92$ ,  $BootSE = 0.18$ ,  $BootCI [-1.29, -0.58]$ ), proving that RVI is an effective mediating variable between IBA severity and consumer behaviour. Note that the direct influence of IBA severity on purchase intention remained significant ( $b = -0.89$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $t(142) = -3.81$ ,  $p = .0002$ ), meaning that while RVI mediates this relationship to some extent, IBA severity still has a direct negative influence on consumer purchase intentions (Table 39).

These results confirmed that RVI is a central psychological process of consumer responses to IBA. As RVI increases, consumers' negative reactions intensify and their willingness to engage with the brand declines. However, the partial mediation in Study 3 implies that aside from RVI, such variables as SIT and self-dignity (discussed in the next section) may also have a role to play in understanding consumer responses to IBA.

**Figure 11:** RVI Mediation Analysis Chart (Study 3; H4a); PROCESS Model 4



Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s. = non-significant

**Table 39:** RVI Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H4a); PROCESS Model 4

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI	-0.89	0.23	-3.81	< .001	(-1.35, -0.43)
IBA → RVI	1.80	0.26	6.80	< .001	(1.27, 2.32)
RVI → PI	-0.51	0.06	-7.94	< .001	(-0.64, -0.38)
Indirect Effect	-0.92	0.18	-	-	(-1.29, -0.58)

Notes: IBA significantly decreases purchase intention by increasing RVI. The significant indirect effect confirms that RVI functions as a key psychological mechanism linking IBA to reduced purchase intention, consistent with H4a.

**IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **RVI**= Religious value-incongruence. **PI**= Purchase intention.

### b) Self-Dignity (H4b)

The following hypothesis examined whether self-dignity mediates the relationship between IBA severity and purchase intention. Specifically, H4b proposed that consumers exposed to Mild IBA would perceive significantly higher levels of self-dignity compared to those exposed to Severe IBA, and that self-dignity would positively influence purchase intention.

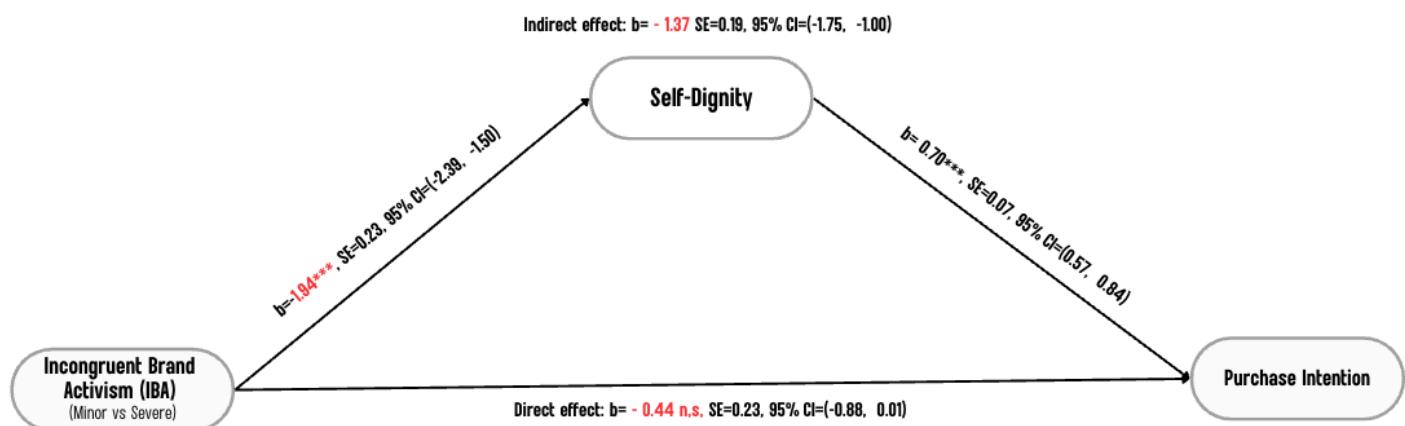
The direct mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 supported the hypothesis.

Consumers in the Severe IBA condition reported significantly lower self-dignity levels compared to those in the Mild IBA condition ( $b = -1.94$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $t(143) = -8.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, self-dignity had a strong positive effect on purchase intention ( $b = 0.70$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(142) = 10.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming H4b (Figure 12).

Additionally, the indirect effect of IBA severity on purchase intention through self-dignity was significant ( $b = -1.37$ , BootSE = 0.19, BootCI [-1.75, -1.00]), demonstrating that self-dignity plays an essential mediating role in shaping consumer responses to IBA (Table 40). Also, the results showed that the direct effect from IBA to purchase intention is no longer significant when accounting for self-dignity as a mediator ( $b = -0.44$ , BootSE = 0.23, BootCI [-0.88, 0.01]), indicating that self-dignity has fully mediated the relationship.

Therefore, unlike RVI, which increased negative responses to IBA, self-dignity acted as a protective factor. This means that when consumers felt a strong sense of self-dignity, they were more likely to maintain their intention to purchase from the brand despite its incongruent activism. In other words, these findings suggested that self-dignity served as a psychological buffer against the negative effects of IBA, allowing some consumers to sustain their brand engagement even when activism conflicted with their religious and cultural values.

**Figure 12:** Self-Dignity Mediation Analysis Chart (Study 3; H4b); PROCESS Model 4



**Note:** \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s= non-significant

**Table 40:** Self-Dignity Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H4b); PROCESS Model 4

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI	-0.44	0.23	-1.93	.0562	(-0.88, 0.01)
IBA → Self-Dignity	-1.94	0.23	-8.59	< .001	(-2.39, -1.50)
Self-Dignity → PI	0.70	0.07	10.36	< .001	(0.57, 0.84)
Indirect Effect	-1.37	0.19	-	-	(-1.75, -1.00)

**Notes:** IBA significantly undermines consumers' sense of self-dignity, which in turn positively predicts purchase intention. The significant indirect effect alongside a non-significant direct effect suggests fully mediation, supporting H4b.

**IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **PI**= Purchase intention.

### c) Social Identity Threat (H4c)

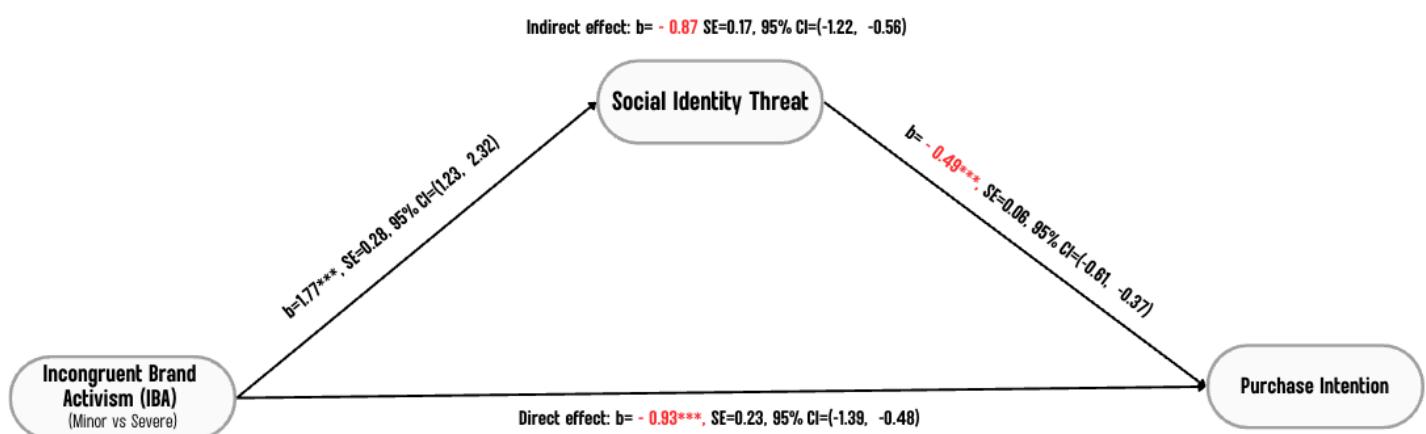
This section explored whether SIT mediates the relationship between IBA severity and purchase intention. H4c proposed that Severe IBA would increase SIT compared to Mild IBA, and that higher SIT would lead to lower purchase intention.

The direct mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 supported the hypothesis.

Participants in the Severe IBA condition reported significantly greater levels of SIT than those in the Mild IBA condition ( $b = 1.77$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $t(143) = 6.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, SIT had a significant negative effect on purchase intention ( $b = -0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(142) = -8.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H4c (Figure 13). Further, the indirect effect of IBA severity on purchase intention via SIT was significant ( $b = -0.87$ ,  $BootSE = 0.17$ ,  $BootCI [-1.22, -0.56]$ ), demonstrating that SIT was a crucial mediating mechanism in explaining consumer conflict with IBA. Unlike self-dignity, which helped consumers sustain their brand engagement, SIT amplified the negative effects of IBA, further reducing purchase intention (Table 41).

These findings suggested that when IBA is perceived as an attack on one's social or cultural identity, it reinforced consumer resistance to the brand. This highlighted the importance of identity-driven factors in shaping consumer responses to IBA, showing that when individuals feel their social identity is under threat, they are more likely to disengage from the brand.

**Figure 13:** SIT Mediation Analysis Chart (Study 3; H4c); PROCESS Model 4



**Note:** \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s= non-significant

**Table 41:** SIT Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H4c) – PROCESS Model 4

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI	-0.93	0.23	-4.06	.0001	(-1.39, -0.48)
IBA → SIT	1.77	0.28	6.43	< .001	(1.23, 2.32)
SIT → PI	-0.49	0.06	-8.00	< .001	(-0.61, -0.37)
Indirect Effect	-0.87	0.17	-	-	(-1.22, -0.56)

Notes: IBA increases SIT, which subsequently reduces purchase intention. The significant indirect effect confirms SIT as an important group-level appraisal mechanism, supporting H4c.

**IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **SIT**= Social identity threat. **PI**= Purchase intention.

### 8.5.3.3 The Mediating Role of Coping Strategies: Religious Obligation-Driven Coping (H5)

#### a) Religious Value Incongruence and Religious Obligation-driven Coping (H5a)

H5a predicted that IBA increases RVI, which would boost engagement in ROD coping, resulting in lower purchase intention. The results of the PROCESS Model 6 analysis confirmed the hypothesis (Table 42). Specifically, the findings indicated that RVI significantly increased ROD coping ( $b = 0.42$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(142) = 7.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and that ROD coping negatively influenced purchase intention via the RVI path ( $b = -0.36$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t(141) = -4.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggested that when consumers perceive high religious misalignment, they are more likely to engage in problem-focused coping (ROD), which in turn reduces their purchase intention (Figure 14). The results were further reinforced as the indirect effect (IBA → RVI → ROD → Purchase Intention) was significant ( $b = -0.27$ ,  $BootSE = 0.10$ ,  $BootCI [-0.49, -0.12]$ ). Therefore, these findings confirmed that the serial mediation path of RVI and ROD mediated consumers' purchase intention.

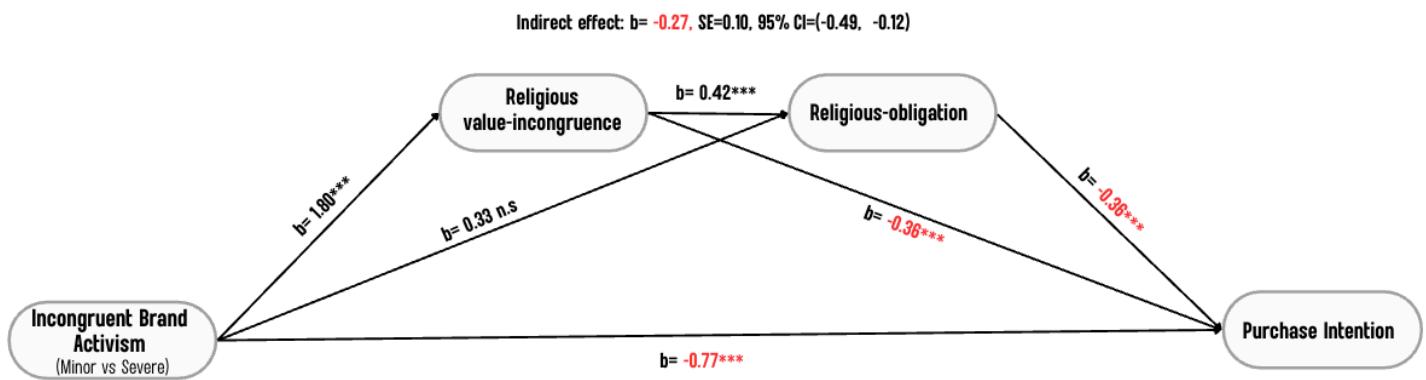
**Table 42:** RVI and ROD Serial Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H5a); PROCESS Model 6

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.77	0.22	-3.43	0.0008	(-1.21, -0.33)
IBA → RVI	1.80	0.26	6.80	< .001	(1.27, 2.32)
IBA → ROD	0.33	0.21	1.60	0.1130	(-0.08, 0.74)
RVI → PI	-0.36	0.07	-5.02	< .001	(-0.50, -0.22)
RVI → ROD	0.42	0.06	7.27	< .001	(0.31, 0.53)
ROD → PI	-0.36	0.09	-4.08	< .001	(-0.54, -0.18)
Indirect Effect (IBA → RVI → ROD → PI)	-0.27	0.10	-	-	(-0.49, -0.12)

Notes: This serial mediation analysis indicates that IBA increases RVI, which activates ROD coping, ultimately reducing purchase intention. The significant indirect effect supports H5a.

**IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **RVI**= Religious value-incongruence. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **PI**= Purchase intention.

**Figure 14:** RVI and ROD Serial Mediation Analysis Chart (Study 3; H5a); PROCESS Model 6



Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s = non-significant

### b) Social Identity Threat and Religious Obligation-Driven Coping (H5b)

Study 3 also examined the role of SIT and ROD as a sequential mediator influencing consumers' purchase intention. H5b proposed that IBA increases SIT, and that higher SIT would, in turn, increase ROD, leading to a lower purchase intention. The PROCESS Model 6 analysis provided support for the hypothesis. As demonstrated in Figure 15, SIT significantly increased ROD coping ( $b = 0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(142) = 9.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which in turn ROD negatively impacted purchase intention ( $b = -0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t(141) = -3.14$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). This confirmed H5b, suggesting that when consumers perceive a strong threat to their social identity, they are more likely to engage in problem-focused coping (i.e., ROD) to uphold their values, resulting in purchase avoidance.

The indirect effects further highlighted the impact of SIT and ROD on consumers' purchase intention. The indirect path from IBA → SIT → ROD → Purchase Intention was significant ( $b = -0.27$ ,  $BootSE = 0.11$ ,  $BootCI [-0.54, -0.08]$ ), demonstrating that SIT strengthens ROD coping, which amplified negative consumer responses (Table 43). These findings emphasised the role of SIT as a psychological driver of resistance to IBA. Consumers who perceived a higher level of identity threat were more inclined to engage in defensive coping strategies (e.g., ROD) rather than reconciling with the brand through forgiveness coping.

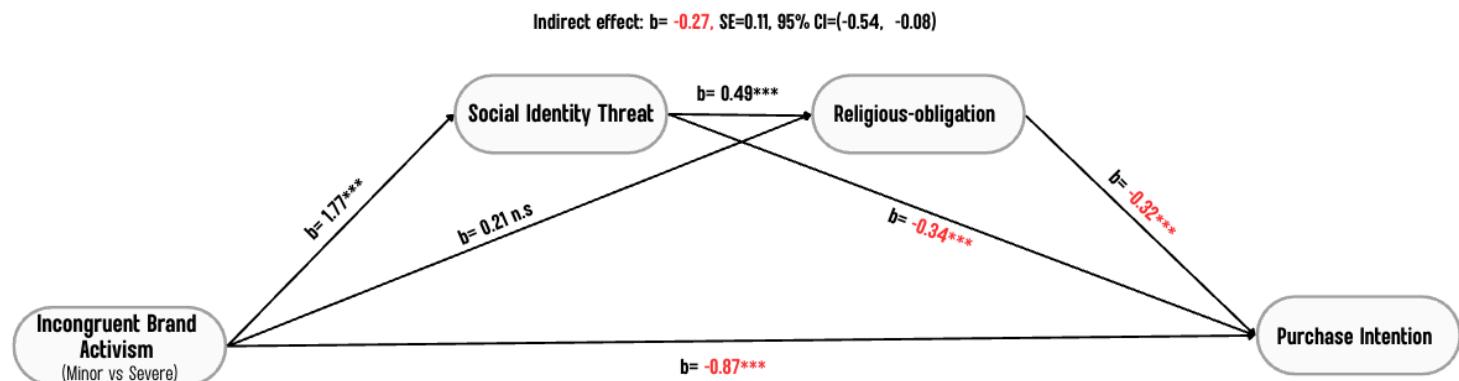
**Table 43:** SIT and ROD Serial Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H5b); PROCESS Model 6

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.87	0.22	-3.87	0.0002	(-1.31, -0.42)
IBA → SIT	1.77	0.28	6.43	< .001	(1.23, 2.32)
IBA → ROD	0.21	0.19	1.14	0.2560	(-0.155, 0.58)
SIT → PI	-0.34	0.08	-4.33	< .001	(-0.49, -0.18)
SIT → ROD	0.49	0.05	9.91	< .001	(0.39, 0.59)
ROD → PI	-0.32	0.10	-3.14	0.002	(-0.51, -0.11)
Indirect Effect (IBA → SIT → ROD → PI)	-0.27	0.11	-	-	(-0.54, -0.08)

Notes: IBA elevates SIT, which in turn increases ROD coping and leads to lower purchase intention. The significant serial indirect effect supports H5b.

**IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat. **PI**= Purchase intention.

**Figure 15:** SIT and ROD Serial Mediation Analysis Chart (Study 3; H5b); PROCESS Model 6



Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s= non-significant

#### 8.5.3.4 The Mediating Role of Coping Strategies: Forgiveness Coping (H6)

H6 proposed that Mild IBA enhances self-dignity and that self-dignity would increase forgiveness coping, increasing purchase intention. The analysis using PROCESS Model 6 provided support for the hypothesis (Table 44).

As predicted, self-dignity significantly increased forgiveness coping ( $b = 0.64$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(142) = 9.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that when consumers feel a strong sense of self-dignity,

they are more likely to engage in forgiveness coping (Figure 16). Additionally, forgiveness coping remained a strong positive predictor of purchase intention ( $b = 0.48$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t(141) = 6.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of IBA → Self-Dignity → Forgiveness → Purchase Intention was also significant ( $b = -0.60$ ,  $BootSE = 0.16$ ,  $BootCI [-0.96, -0.33]$ ), reinforcing that self-dignity promoted forgiveness as a coping mechanism, enabling consumers to maintain brand engagement despite ideological misalignment. Notably, the insignificant direct effect of IBA on purchase intention in the serial mediation path involving self-dignity and forgiveness coping reflected a fully mediated path.

These findings highlighted the psychological function of self-dignity in consumer coping strategies. Self-dignity served as a protective factor against extreme negative consumer reactions, leading consumers toward forgiveness. When consumers felt that their dignity remained intact despite value incongruence, they were more open to forgiveness, which could help them maintain or reconcile their relationship with the brand.

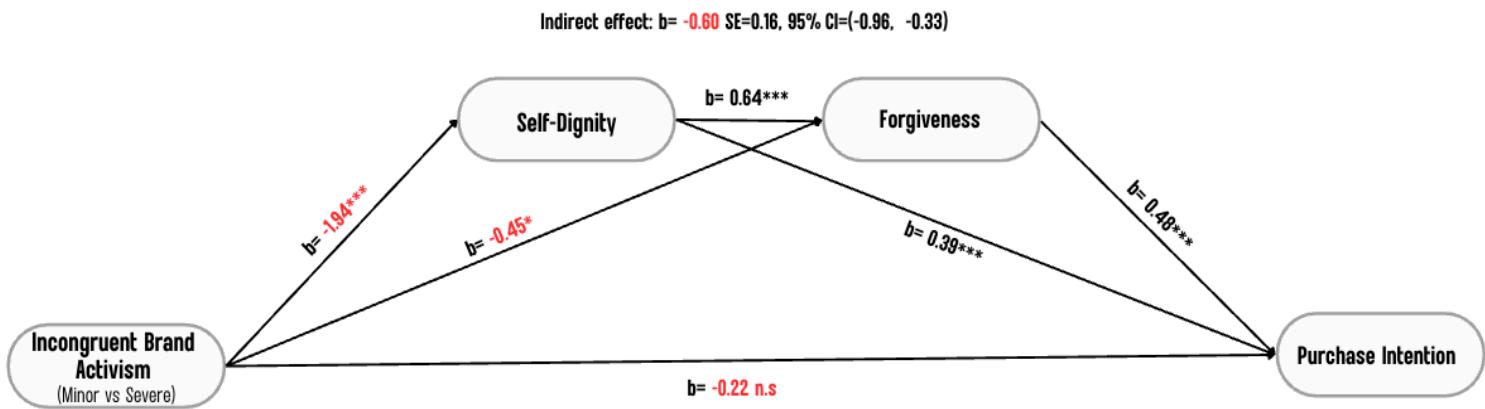
**Table 44:** Self-Dignity and Forgiveness Coping Serial Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H6); PROCESS Model 6

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.22	0.20	-1.08	0.2823	(-0.62, 0.18)
IBA → Self-Dignity	-1.94	0.23		< .001	(-2.39, -1.50)
IBA → Forgiveness coping	-0.45	0.22	-2.05	0.0423	(-0.87, -0.01)
Self-Dignity → PI	0.39	0.08	5.04	< .001	(0.24, 0.55)
Self-Dignity → Forgiveness coping	0.64	0.07	9.81	< .001	(0.51, 0.77)
Forgiveness coping → PI	0.48	0.08	6.23	< .001	(0.33, 0.64)
Indirect Effect (IBA → SD → FC → PI)	-0.60	0.16	-	-	(-0.96, -0.33)

Notes: IBA reduces self-dignity, which subsequently influences forgiveness coping and leads to higher purchase intention. The significant serial indirect effect supports H6.

**IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **SD**= Self-dignity. **FC**= Forgiveness coping. **PI**= Purchase intention.

**Figure 16:** Self-Dignity and Forgiveness Coping Serial Mediation Analysis Chart (Study 3; H6); PROCESS Model 6



Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s = non-significant

Finally, to further validate the findings, I also ran additional PROCESS Model 6 analysis while controlling for the potential confounding variables' impact, such as gender, age, education level, issue involvement, and CBA (see Appendix O; Tables B, C, & D). The results remained significant, with the indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention through RVI and ROD ( $b = -0.19$ , BootSE = 0.08, BootCI [-0.38, -0.07]) and the indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention through SIT and ROD ( $b = -0.21$ , BootSE = 0.10, BootCI [-0.45, -0.56]) being both statistically significant (H5). Additionally, the self-dignity path exhibited a significant effect, despite the covariate variables, such that the indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention through self-dignity and forgiveness coping ( $b = -0.54$ , BootSE = 0.16, BootCI [-0.90, -0.25]) remained significant (H6). Therefore, as the inclusion of these covariates did not substantially change the serial mediation effect, the outcomes reinforced the validity and generalisability of the findings.

#### 8.5.4 Study 3 Dissuasion and Summary

Besides extending Study 2's findings through the replication of its findings in a new context (Saudi Arabia's hosting of music festivals), this study examined the impact of psychological mediators of cognitive appraisals (RVI, self-dignity, and SIT) and coping strategies (ROD and forgiveness coping). Study 3 mainly focused on three hypotheses (H4-H6). While H4 investigated the direct mediating impact of cognitive appraisals on purchase intention, H5 and H6 focused on the serial mediation impact of cognitive appraisals and coping strategies on purchase intention. Specifically, H5 posited that ROD coping would lead to lower

purchase intention, while H6 suggested that forgiveness coping would enhance purchase intention.

The study provides validation for all hypotheses. It highlights that RVI, SIT and self-dignity independently mediate and shape consumer responses to IBA (H4). The findings also indicate that RVI and SIT both have a significantly positive influence on ROD coping, which subsequently reduces purchase intention (H5). On the other hand, self-dignity primarily fosters forgiveness coping, which enhances purchase intention (H6), suggesting that dignity serves as a psychological buffer against IBA. These findings suggest that while religious and identity-based threats can promote consumer resistance, self-dignity provides a platform for forgiveness with the brand, offering a mechanism for mitigating negative responses to IBA.

Furthermore, the study suggests that the effectiveness of coping strategies varies according to the underlying psychological and cognitive appraisals. ROD coping consistently yields lower purchase intention across both mediation pathways (RIV and SIT), underpinning the idea that when consumers perceive a religious duty to reject a brand, they disengage entirely. This religious duty to disengage arises when consumers appraise IBA as a threat to their religious values or social identity. Hence, Study 3 provides further insights into why some consumers react negatively to such IBA by exploring the role of religious values and social identity.

On the other hand, forgiveness coping is a strong indicator of higher purchase intention. The presence of forgiveness as a coping strategy challenges the conventional BA research, which typically assumes value incongruence as a stimulus to generally negative consumer responses (Hydock et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Shukla et al. 2024). Conversely, such evidence suggests that some consumers may mitigate the consequences of IBA through the positive appraisal of self-dignity, which enables them to employ emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g., forgiveness coping) to maintain their relationship with the brand despite their incongruent ideologies. This nuanced comprehension provides valuable insight into BA's dark side, pointing out that not all instances of IBA result in automatic negative consumer response, and coping mechanisms play a crucial role in shaping behavioural results.

Therefore, by determining that RVI and SIT enhance ROD coping while self-dignity fosters forgiveness, Study 3 provides a more comprehensive explanation of how consumers manage value incongruence with brands, offering both theoretical and managerial contributions to the management of BA in culturally sensitive markets.

Finally, Table 45 presents a summary of Model 4's findings (H4), which provides IBA's direct and indirect effects on purchase intention via RVI, self-dignity, and SIT (i.e., single mediation). It confirms that all three mediators play essential roles in purchase intention, with self-dignity playing the strongest positive role and SIT and RVI reinforcing negative roles. Table 46 presents the summary results of Model 6 (H5 and H6), including the serial and direct mediation impacts of IBA on purchase intention via RVI, SIT, and self-dignity, along with their corresponding coping strategies (ROD and forgiveness coping).

**Table 45:** Overall Direct Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H4); PROCESS Model 4

Path (Hypothesis)	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Hypothesis Supported?
<b>RV<sub>I</sub> Path (H4a)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.89	0.23	-3.81	0.0002	(-1.35, -0.43)	
IBA → RVI	1.80	0.26	6.80	< .001	(1.27, 2.32)	
RVI → PI	-0.51	0.06	-7.94	< .001	(-0.64, -0.38)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → RVI → PI)	-0.92	0.18	-	-	(-1.29, -0.58)	
<b>Self-Dignity Path (H4b)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.44	0.23	-1.93	0.056	(-0.88, 0.01)	
IBA → Self-Dignity	-1.94	0.23	-8.59	< .001	(-2.40, -1.50)	
Self-Dignity → PI	0.70	0.07	10.36	< .001	(0.57, 0.84)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → Self-Dignity → PI)	-1.37	0.19	-	-	(-1.75, -1.00)	
<b>SIT Path (H4c)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.93	0.23	-4.06	0.0001	(-1.39, -0.48)	
IBA → SIT	1.77	0.28	6.43	< .001	(1.23, 2.32)	
SIT → PI	-0.49	0.06	-8.00	< .001	(-0.61, -0.37)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → SIT → PI)	-0.87	0.17	-	-	(-1.23, -0.56)	

Notes: **IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **RVI**= Religious value-incongruence. **SIT**= Social identity threat. **PI**= Purchase intention.

**Table 46:** Overall Serial Mediation Analysis Results (Study 3; H5& H6); PROCESS Model 6

Path (Hypothesis)	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Hypothesis Supported?
<b>RV1 and ROD Path (H5a)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.77	0.22	-3.43	0.0008	(-1.21, -0.33)	
IBA → RVI	1.80	0.26	6.80	< .001	(1.27, 2.32)	
IBA → ROD	0.33	0.21	1.60	0.1130	(-0.08, 0.74)	
RVI → PI	-0.36	0.07	-5.02	< .001	(-0.50, -0.22)	
RVI → ROD	0.42	0.06	7.27	< .001	(0.31, 0.53)	
ROD → PI	-0.36	0.09	-4.08	< .001	(-0.54, -0.18)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → RVI → ROD → PI)	-0.27	0.10	-	-	(-0.49, -0.12)	
<b>SIT and ROD Path (H5b)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.87	0.22	-3.87	0.0002	(-1.31, -0.42)	
IBA → SIT	1.77	0.28	6.43	< .001	(1.23, 2.32)	
IBA → ROD	0.21	0.19	1.14	0.2560	(-0.155, 0.58)	
SIT → PI	-0.34	0.08	-4.33	< .001	(-0.49, -0.18)	
SIT → ROD	0.49	0.05	9.91	< .001	(0.39, 0.59)	
ROD → PI	-0.32	0.10	-3.14	0.002	(-0.51, -0.11)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → SIT → ROD → PI)	-0.27	0.11	-	-	(-0.54, -0.08)	
<b>Self-Dignity and Forgiveness Coping Path (H6)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.22	0.20	-1.08	0.2823	(-0.62, 0.18)	
IBA → Self-Dignity	-1.94	0.23		< .001	(-2.39, -1.50)	
IBA → Forgiveness coping	-0.45	0.22	-2.05	0.0423	(-0.87, -0.01)	
Self-Dignity → PI	0.39	0.08	5.04	< .001	(0.24, 0.55)	
Self-Dignity → Forgiveness coping	0.64	0.07	9.81	< .001	(0.51, 0.77)	
Forgiveness coping → PI	0.48	0.08	6.23	< .001	(0.33, 0.64)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → SD → FC → PI)	-0.60	0.16	-	-	(-0.96, -0.33)	

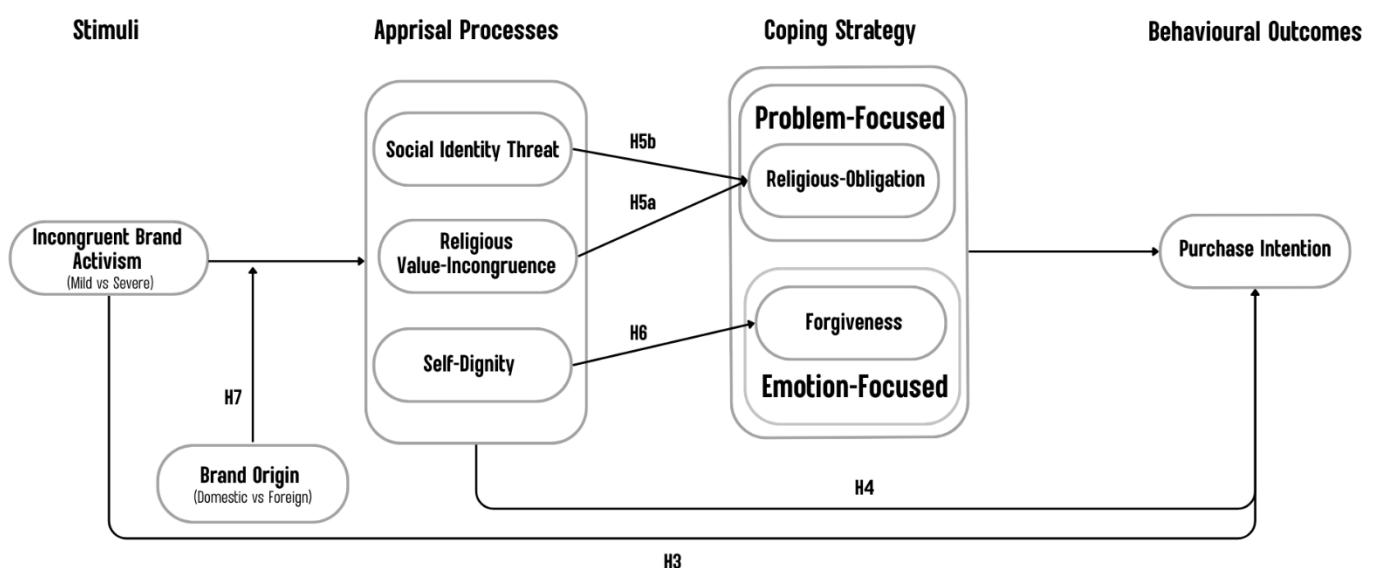
Notes: **IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **RV1**= Religious value-incongruence. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat. **SD**= Self-dignity. **FC**= Forgiveness coping. **PI**= Purchase intention.

## 8.6 Study 4: The Role of Brand Origin in Incongruent Brand Activism

Following the results of Studies 2 and 3, Study 4 is the final stage of the research, aiming to replicate and extend previous findings by incorporating a moderation analysis. While previous findings established the mediating roles of RVI, self-dignity, and SIT on consumer coping strategies and purchase intention, Study 4 investigates the influence of external factors on these processes. Specifically, this study examines brand origin as a moderator of consumer responses to IBA. This moderator addresses the question of whether consumer responses toward IBA vary depending on whether a domestic or foreign brand initiates the activism.

Findings from the qualitative phase (Chapter 5) suggested that Saudi consumers may expect local brands to be more accountable for upholding cultural and religious values and are therefore less forgiving of local brands' engagement in IBA. Conversely, foreign brands may be afforded more flexibility, since they are not expected to represent Saudi societal norms. Study 4 tests these hypotheses empirically, assessing whether brand origin moderates the mediating path between IBA and consumers' cognitive appraisals, RVI, self-dignity, and SIT. By incorporating this moderator, Study 4 offers a more nuanced understanding of how contextual conditions (e.g., brand origin) influence consumer responses toward IBA in a religiously and culturally sensitive market. Figure 17 illustrates the overall conceptual model of Study 4.

**Figure 17:** Study 4 Overall Research Model



### 8.6.1 Data Preparation and Descriptive Statistics

To ensure data consistency and quality, Study 4 followed the same data preparation and screening procedures as the previous studies. The dataset was examined for missing values, outliers, and violations of normality. Study 4 initially recruited 377 participants; however, data cleaning was conducted to remove incomplete and inattentive responses, ensuring the reliability of the data. A total of 30 participants incorrectly answered the attention check question, while 154 participants withdrew from the study. Hence, they were excluded from further analysis. This resulted in a final valid sample of 193 participants. Appendix S presents the descriptive statistics of Study 4.

The dataset was further examined for missing values among key study variables, including purchase intention, forgiveness, RVI, ROD, SIT, and self-dignity. The results showed that the key variables had complete data. Similar to previous studies, missing data were also present for demographic variables such as age, gender, and education (8 cases missing for each). However, as demographic variables were not central to hypothesis testing, imputation was not applied, and analyses using demographics were conducted with available cases only.

Z-scores and boxplots were used to detect potential outliers in the key study variables. The range of Z-scores for all variables was within the acceptable limits of  $\pm 3.29$ , indicating that no extreme outliers were present in the data (Appendix S). Since all Z-scores fell within the acceptable range, no outliers were identified. Furthermore, the boxplot analysis confirmed the absence of outliers, indicating the reliability of the dataset for further statistical analysis (Appendix S).

As with the previous Studies, normality was established based on skewness and kurtosis values (Appendix S). The results indicated that all variables showed acceptable normality. These values were all within the acceptable range, confirming that the distributions of the key variables were close to normal and parametric analyses could be employed for further hypothesis testing. In general, the screening of data ensured that Study 4's dataset was not problematic, with no missing values in key variables, no outliers, and no extreme departures from normality. Such results ensured the stability of subsequent statistical analyses and supported the consistency of data preparation for Study 4.

Table 47 describes the demographic characteristics of the participants in Study 4. Missing data occurred for 8 cases for each demographic variable, resulting in analyses being

conducted with 185 valid responses for gender, age group, and education level. The majority of participants were male (80.5%), with a smaller proportion of female respondents (19.5%). The age distribution showed that the largest group of participants was in the 28-34 age range (34.1%), followed by the 18-27 group (23.2%) and the 35-43 group (23.2%). The remaining participants were older, with only 2.7% being 60 years or older. Regarding educational level, most respondents held a bachelor's degree or equivalent (58.9%), while smaller proportions had a master's degree (21.6%), a high school education (5.9%), or less than a high school education (0.5%).

**Table 47:** Demographic Characteristics of The Sample (Study 4)

Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	149	80.5
Female	36	19.5
<b>Age Group</b>		
18 - 27	43	23.2
28 - 34	63	34.1
35 - 43	43	23.2
44 - 59	31	16.8
60 or Older	5	2.7
<b>Education Level</b>		
High School Diploma	11	5.9
Bachelor's Degree	109	58.9
Master's Degree	40	21.6
Doctoral Degree	25	13.5

### 8.6.2 Reliability and Validity Checks

To validate the stability, reliability, and validity of Study 4, statistical tests were employed, similar to those used in previous studies. A variety of checks were included in Study 4 to ensure the success of the experimental manipulation and the reliability of the measured constructs. A binomial test was conducted as an initial manipulation check to determine whether participants had accurately identified the brand position. As shown in Table 48, the results indicated that 94% of participants in the Mild condition correctly identified the brand position, significantly exceeding the 50% chance level ( $p < .001$ ). In the Severe condition, 71% of the participants correctly identified the brand position, which was also well above the

50% range ( $p < .001$ ). These results replicated that participants, in general, were able to process the intended manipulation; however, the accuracy of recognition was lower for the Severe condition compared to the Mild condition.

To mitigate potential memory-based recall limitations in manipulation checks, a second perception-based manipulation check was included to compare perceived severity between the Severe and Mild conditions, as in Study 3. Participants indicated the extent to which the brand's tweet was incongruent with their values. As expected, the individuals in the Severe group reported much higher levels of severity ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) than those in the Mild group ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ). An independent-samples t-test also confirmed that this difference was statistically significant,  $t(165) = -6.04$ ,  $p < .001$  (Table 49). These results enhanced the validity of manipulation and confirmed that experimental conditions effectively separated perceived levels of IBA.

**Table 48:** Manipulation Check – Binomial Test Results (Study 4)

Condition	Category	N	Observed Proportion	Test Proportion	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Mild	Incorrect	6	0.06	0.50	.000
	Correct	92	0.94		
Severe	Incorrect	28	0.29		.000
	Correct	67	0.71		

**Table 49:** Perception-Based Manipulation Check (Independent Samples t-Test; Study 4)

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t(df = 165)	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
Mild	89	3.98	2.22	-6.04	< .001	(-2.53, -1.28)
Severe	78	5.88	1.86			

Furthermore, to enhance the validity of the experimental design, a third manipulation test was conducted to measure participants' perceptions regarding the issue as incongruent with Saudi traditions. Specifically, the participants rated on a scale from 1 to 7 how much they agreed with the following statement: "Saudi women's participation in public sports (e.g., swimming, boxing, and running) does not align with Saudi traditions." Participants indicated that the issue was not in accordance with Saudi traditions, with an average rating of 5.65 (standard deviation = 1.75). A one-sample t-test also confirmed that this value was significantly higher

than the neutral midpoint of 4 ( $t(166) = 12.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.94$ ). This result additionally affirmed the success of the IBA manipulation (Table 50).

**Table 50:** Perception-Based Manipulation Check for Issue Incongruence with Saudi Traditions

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Cohen's d
Issue Incongruence	167	5.65	1.75	12.19	166	.000	1.65	(1.38, 1.91)	0.94

The last manipulation test was administered to verify whether participants accurately identified the intended brand origin (Davvetas et al. 2024). A one-sample t-test was performed under both conditions (Saudi vs. American brand) with a midpoint test value of 4, to see if perceptions were significantly greater than neutral. Results showed that the Saudi brand condition participants rated the brand as significantly more Saudi ( $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ,  $t(92) = 8.53$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.89$ ). Likewise, American brand condition participants rated the brand as significantly more American ( $M = 6.14$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $t(99) = 18.46$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.85$ ). These results validated that brand origin manipulation was effective (see Table 51). To assess the internal consistency of the key constructs, Cronbach's alpha was used for measurement reliability. As shown in Table 52, all measured variables exhibited high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the widely accepted value of 0.70.

Overall, these findings confirmed that the study's experimental manipulations were successfully implemented, with participants accurately recognising and perceiving the brand's position as intended. Additionally, the high Cronbach's alpha values demonstrated strong internal consistency across all key variables, ensuring the reliability of the measurement instruments. These results provided confidence in the study's ability to test its hypotheses with methodological rigour.

**Table 51:** Brand Origin Manipulation Check

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% CI (Lowe, Upper)	Cohen's d
Saudi Brand	93	5.52	1.72	8.53	92	.000	1.52	(1.17, 1.88)	0.89
US Brand	100	6.14	1.16	18.46	99	.000	2.14	(1.91, 2.37)	1.85

**Table 52:** Reliability Analysis – Cronbach's Alpha (Study 4)

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Purchase Intention	3	0.95
Forgiveness	4	0.93
Religious Value-Incongruence (RVI)	3	0.92
Religious Obligation	4	0.90
Social Identity Threat (SIT)	4	0.96
Self-Dignity	4	0.89

### 8.6.3 Hypothesis Testing

This section presents the results of hypothesis testing, with a primary focus on examining the moderating effects of brand origin on the mediating path between IBA and cognitive appraisals. To assess these effects, a moderated serial mediation model analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS Model 83 (with 5000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals) to primarily examine H7. In addition to the moderation analysis, this study also validates the previously tested hypotheses (H3-H6) by reassessing the direct (i.e., IBA) and mediating effects of RVI, self-dignity, and SIT, as well as the coping strategies of ROD and forgiveness coping. An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the direct impact of IBA severity on purchase intention (H3). Direct and serial mediation analyses, using Hayes' PROCESS Models 4 & 6, were employed to test the direct and sequential mediating pathways (H4–H6).

#### 8.6.3.1 Re-examination of All Prior Hypotheses (H3-H6)

To verify the strength of the findings from previous studies, Study 4 repeated all the hypotheses (H3-H6) examined in Studies 2 and 3. Study 4 findings supported all previously established hypotheses, further verifying the validity of the theoretical model suggested.

As shown in Table 53, H3 results indicated that increased IBA severity significantly reduces purchase intention, consistent with prior studies. Moreover, the mediation tests in Tables 54 and 55 confirmed the validity of the hypothesised indirect effects. Specifically, the results confirmed the mediating roles of RVI (H4a), self-dignity (H4b), and SIT (H4c) in explaining the negative effect of IBA on purchase intention (Table 54). Furthermore, the serial mediation pathways (H5 and H6) of ROD and forgiveness coping were supported, reinforcing the psychological and coping mechanisms by which consumers respond to IBA (Table 55). Generally, the results confirmed the validity of relationships reported in the previous study (i.e., Study 3), providing empirical foundation for testing the hypothesised moderating effects of brand origin proposed in H7.

**Table 53:** Independent Samples t-Test Results for IBA Severity and Purchase Intention (Study 4; H3)

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t (df = 191)	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Cohen's d
Mild IBA	98	4.23	1.55	5.902	< .001	(0.88, 1.77)	0.85
Severe IBA	95	2.91	1.57				

Notes: IBA= Incongruent brand activism.

**Table 54:** Overall Direct Mediation Analysis Results (Study 4; H4); PROCESS Model 4

Path (Hypothesis)	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Hypothesis Supported?
<b>RV1 Path (H4a)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.68	0.20	-3.41	0.0008	(-1.08, -0.29)	
IBA → RVI	1.10	0.21	5.16	0.0000	(0.68, 1.52)	
RVI → PI	-0.58	0.06	-9.11	0.0000	(-0.70, -0.45)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → RVI → PI) (H4a)	-0.64	0.13	-	-	(-0.92, -0.38)	
<b>Self-Dignity Path (H4b)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.36	0.19	-1.85	0.0653	(-0.75, 0.02)	
IBA → Self-Dignity	-1.35	0.19	-6.90	0.0000	(-1.74, -0.96)	
Self-Dignity → PI	0.71	0.06	10.83	0.0000	(0.58, 0.83)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → Self-Dignity → PI) (H4b)	-0.96	0.17	-	-	(-1.31, -0.64)	
<b>SIT Path (H4c)</b>						<b>Yes</b>

IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.67	0.21	-3.16	0.0018	(-1.09, -0.25)	
IBA → SIT	1.47	0.25	5.87	0.0000	(0.97, 1.96)	
SIT → PI	-0.44	0.05	-7.83	0.0000	(-0.55, -0.33)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → SIT → PI) (H4c)	-0.65	0.15	-	-	(-0.98, -0.38)	

Notes: **IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **RVI**= Religious value-incongruence. **SIT**= Social identity threat.. **PI**= Purchase intention.

**Table 55:** Overall Serial Mediation Analysis Results (Study 4; H5 &H6); PROCESS Model 6

Path (Hypothesis)	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	Hypothesis Supported?
<b>RVI and ROD Path (H5a)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.40	0.18	-2.16	0.031	(-0.76, -0.03)	
IBA → RVI	1.10	0.21	5.16	0.000	(0.68, 1.52)	
IBA → ROD						
RVI → PI	-0.32	0.07	-4.61	0.000	(-0.45, -0.18)	
RVI → ROD	0.51	0.06	9.15	0.000	(0.40, 0.62)	
ROD → PI	-0.52	0.07	-7.03	0.000	(-0.66, -0.37)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → RVI → ROD → PI)	-0.29	0.07	-	-	(-0.44, -0.16)	
<b>SIT and ROD Path (H5b)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.45	0.19	-2.37	0.018	(-0.84, -0.07)	
IBA → SIT	1.47	0.25	5.87	0.000	(0.97, 1.96)	
IBA → ROD						
SIT → PI	-0.14	0.06	-2.12	0.035	(-0.27, -0.01)	
SIT → ROD	0.51	0.04	11.73	0.000	(0.42, 0.60)	
ROD → PI	-0.59	0.08	-7.03	0.000	(-0.75, -0.42)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → SIT → ROD → PI)	-0.45	0.10	-	-	(-0.65, -0.27)	
<b>Self-Dignity and Forgiveness Coping Path (H6)</b>						<b>Yes</b>
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.02	0.17	-0.16	0.865	(-0.37, 0.31)	
IBA → Self-Dignity	-1.35	0.19	-6.90	0.000	(-1.74, -0.96)	
IBA → Forgiveness coping						
Self-Dignity → PI	0.29	0.07	3.87	0.000	(0.14, 0.43)	

Self-Dignity → Forgiveness coping	0.73	0.06	12.07	0.000	(0.61, 0.84)	
Forgiveness coping → PI	0.58	0.06	8.72	0.000	(0.46, 0.71)	
Indirect Effect (IBA → Self-Dignity → Forgiveness coping → PI)	-0.57	0.12	-	-	(-0.82, -0.36)	

Notes: **IBA**= Incongruent brand activism. **RFI**= Religious value-incongruence. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat. **PI**= Purchase intention.

### 8.6.3.2 The Moderation Role of Brand Origin (H7)

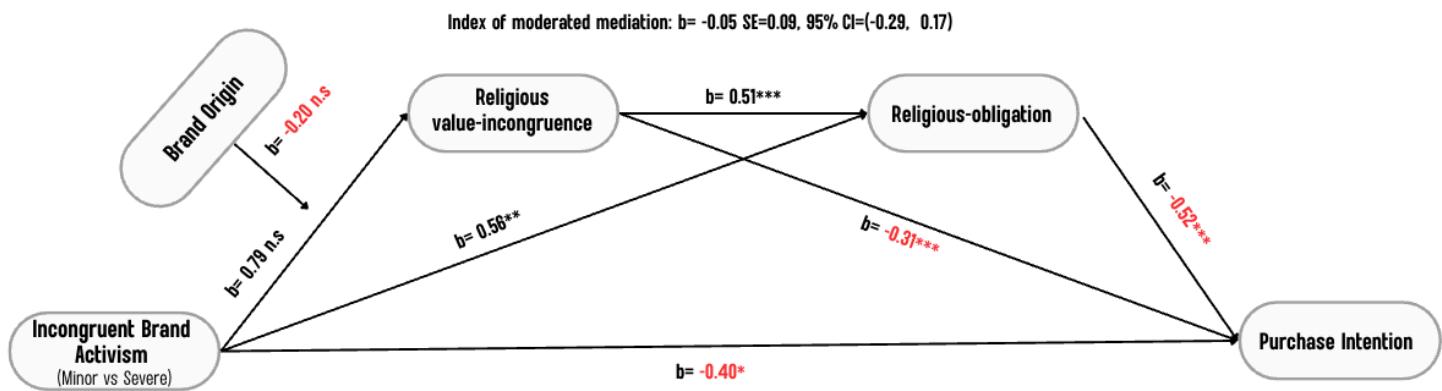
#### a) Religious Value Incongruence (RFI) Pathway (H7a):

To examine Hypothesis H7a, a moderated serial mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes PROCESS Model 83, with IBA as the independent variable (X), RFI as the first mediator (M1), ROD coping as the second mediator (M2), brand origin as the moderator (W), and purchase intention as the dependent variable (Y). The model examined whether the indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention, mediated by RFI and ROD coping, was influenced by brand origin (domestic vs. foreign).

Results revealed that IBA had a positive effect on RFI ( $b = 0.79$ ,  $SE = 0.68$ ,  $p = .2462$ ), although this relationship was not statistically significant. Additionally, the interaction between IBA and brand origin on RFI was not significant ( $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.42$ ,  $p = .6338$ ), suggesting that brand origin did not significantly moderate the direct effect of IBA on RFI (Figure 18). This was also reflected in the non-significant increase in explained variance due to the interaction ( $R^2 = 0.001$ ,  $F(1,189) = 0.22$ ,  $p = 0.6338$ ). Importantly, the serial indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention through RFI and ROD coping was significant for both domestic ( $b = -0.26$ ,  $BootSE = 0.09$ ,  $BootCI [-0.47, -0.08]$ ) and foreign brands ( $b = -0.32$ ,  $BootSE = 0.08$ ,  $BootCI [-0.50, -0.15]$ ). Yet, the index of moderated mediation for this serial path was again non-significant (Index =  $-0.0543$ ,  $BootCI [-0.29, 0.17]$ ) (Figure 18).

In sum, while the indirect pathway from IBA to purchase intention through RFI and ROD coping was statistically supported (H5a), the moderation effect of brand origin on the path between IBA and RFI was not. Therefore, Hypothesis H7a was not supported, although the overall serial mediation effect was robust across both domestic and foreign brand conditions.

**Figure 18:** Brand Origin Moderation Analysis Chart (Study 4; RVI & ROD Pathway; H7a); PROCESS Model 83



Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s= non-significant

b) Self-Dignity Pathway (H7b):

Hypothesis H7b proposed that brand origin moderates the indirect effects of IBA on consumer purchase intention through the mediators of self-dignity and forgiveness coping. Specifically, it was expected that IBA from local brands would evoke a stronger impact on self-dignity, decreasing the tendency to forgive the brand compared to foreign brands. To test whether the effect of IBA on self-dignity was moderated by brand origin, a moderated serial mediation model (PROCESS Model 83, 5,000 bootstrap samples) was conducted.

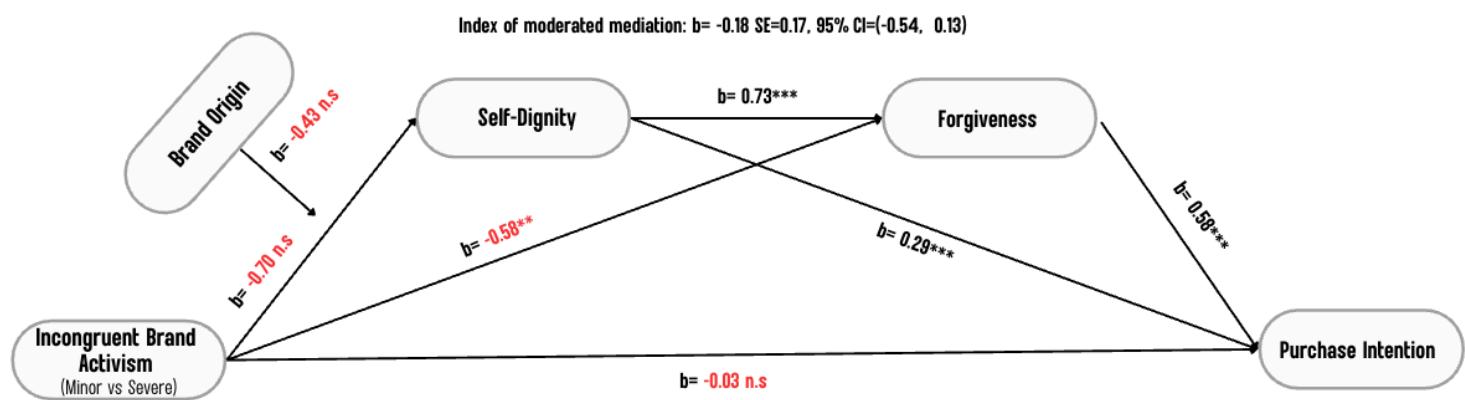
The results indicated that the direct effect of IBA on self-dignity was not significant ( $b = -0.70$ ,  $SE = 0.63$ ,  $p = .2674$ , 95% CI  $[-1.94, 0.54]$ ). Likewise, the main effect of brand origin was not significant ( $b = 0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.62$ ,  $p = .4003$ , 95% CI  $[-0.69, 1.74]$ ). Most importantly, the interaction between IBA and brand origin on self-dignity was also not statistically significant ( $b = -0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.40$ ,  $p = .2723$ , 95% CI  $[-1.20, 0.34]$ ) (Figure 19). The model yielded a non-significant increase in explained variance due to the interaction ( $R^2 = .0051$ ,  $F(1,189) = 1.21$ ,  $p = .2723$ ). These results suggested that brand origin did not moderate the effect of IBA on self-dignity.

Despite the absence of a significant moderation, mediation analyses revealed that self-dignity significantly predicted forgiveness coping ( $b = 0.73$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and both self-dignity ( $b = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and forgiveness coping ( $b = 0.58$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < .001$ )

significantly predicted purchase intention. The direct effect of IBA on purchase intention was not significant ( $b = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p = .8656$ , 95% CI  $[-0.36, 0.31]$ ), suggesting that its effect is primarily indirect. The serial indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention through self-dignity and forgiveness coping was significant for both foreign and domestic brands, foreign brands ( $b = -0.48$ ,  $BootSE = 0.16$ , 95% CI  $[-0.81, -0.19]$ ) and domestic brands ( $b = -0.66$ ,  $BootSE = 0.14$ , 95% CI  $[-0.95, -0.42]$ ). Yet again, the index of moderated mediation for this serial path was not statistically significant (Index =  $-0.18$ ,  $BootSE = 0.17$ , 95% CI  $[-0.54, 0.13]$ ) (Figure 19).

Taken together, these findings suggested that although IBA indirectly reduces purchase intention via its impact on self-dignity and forgiveness coping, the brand origin does not significantly moderate these effects. Therefore, Hypothesis H7b was not supported.

**Figure 19:** Brand Origin Moderation Analysis Chart (Study 4; Self-Dignity & Forgiveness Coping Pathway; H7b); PROCESS Model 83



**Note:** \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s= non-significant

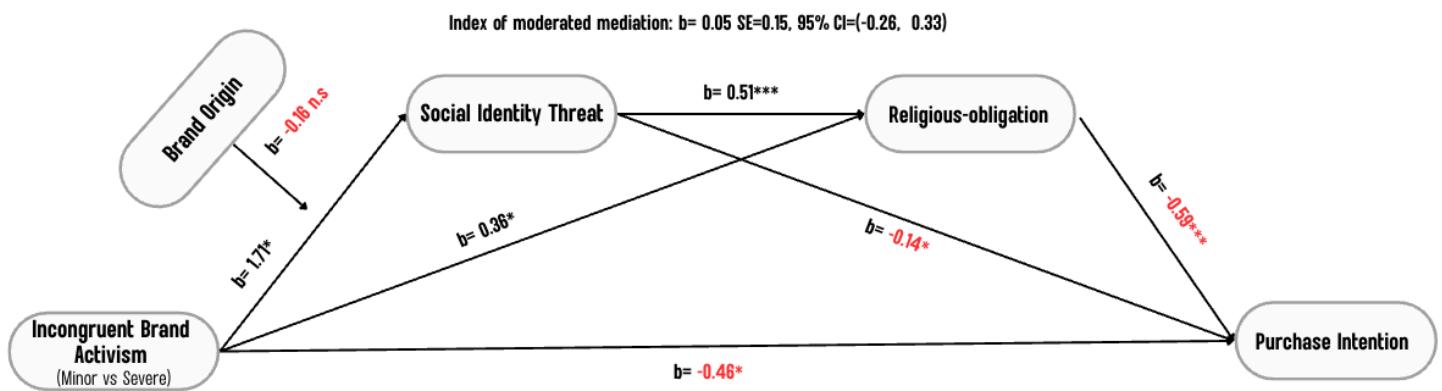
### c) Social Identity Threat (SIT) (H7c):

To examine whether the impact of IBA on SIT was moderated by brand origin, a moderation model (PROCESS Model 83, 5,000 bootstraps) was tested. The results revealed that IBA had a significant positive effect on SIT ( $b = 1.71$ ,  $SE = 0.80$ ,  $p = .0337$ , 95% CI  $[0.13, 3.30]$ ), indicating that exposure to IBA increased participants' feelings of SIT. In contrast, the main effect of brand origin was not significant ( $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.80$ ,  $p = .9069$ , 95% CI  $[-1.48, 1.67]$ ), suggesting that foreign versus domestic brand origin alone did not significantly impact perceived threat levels.

Crucially, the interaction term between IBA and brand origin was not statistically significant ( $b = -0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.50$ ,  $p = .7449$ , 95% CI  $[-1.15, 0.82]$ ), suggesting that the effect of IBA on SIT did not significantly differ based on whether the brand was foreign or domestic (Figure 20). The change in explained variance due to the interaction was also minimal and non-significant ( $R^2 = .0005$ ,  $F(1,189) = 0.106$ ,  $p = .7449$ ). Furthermore, the moderated mediation index indicated that the brand's origin did not significantly influence these indirect effects of IBA on purchase intention through the SIT and ROD path (Index =  $-0.05$ , BootSE =  $0.15$ , BootCI =  $[-0.26, 0.33]$ ) (Figure 20). This indicated that the conditional indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention, mediated by SIT and ROD, did not vary significantly between foreign and domestic brands.

Therefore, while IBA significantly increased perceptions of SIT, brand origin did not moderate this effect, and the strength of the indirect effect through SIT and ROD on purchase intention remained statistically insignificant across both brand conditions. Therefore, hypothesis H7c was not supported.

**Figure 20:** Brand Origin Moderation Analysis Chart (Study 4; SIT & ROD Pathway; H7c); PROCESS Model 83



**Note:** \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , n.s= non-significant

#### **8.6.4 Study 4 Discussion and Summary**

Study 4 aimed to examine the moderating role of brand origin in the interaction between IBA and consumers' cognitive appraisals, specifically RVI, SIT, and self-dignity. Drawing on the TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) as well as the qualitative results, it was hypothesised (H7) that the severity of IBA would interact with brand origin to have differential impacts on consumers' cognitive appraisals. Specifically, domestic (foreign) brands engaged in Severe (Mild) IBA would evoke stronger (weaker) perceptions of RVI, SIT, and lower (higher) self-dignity than their foreign (domestic) counterparts.

Contrary to expectations, the results revealed no significant moderation effect of brand origin on the relationship between IBA and any of the cognitive appraisal variables. Whether the IBA originated from a domestic or foreign brand, participants' levels of perceived RVI, SIT, and self-dignity did not differ significantly. These findings indicate that brand origin did not intensify or mitigate the cognitive stress triggered by IBA, suggesting a more generalised consumer response pattern that is primarily shaped by the incongruence itself, rather than the source of the activism.

However, despite the absence of significant moderation effects, the study provided strong evidence for the indirect pathways (mediation) by which IBA influenced consumer purchase intention. That is, the serial indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention via RVI (or SIT) and ROD coping was significant for both domestic and foreign brands. Also, the impact of IBA on purchase intention through self-dignity and forgiveness coping remained significant across both brand origin conditions. These serial mediation effects underscore the fundamental role of cognitive appraisals and coping strategies in influencing consumer responses to IBA, independent of brand origin.

### **8.7 Chapter Summary**

In four experiments, this research systematically examines how Saudi consumers respond to BA when it aligns or conflicts with their cultural and religious values. Study 1 establishes the significant impact of BA and the essential role of RVI as a mediator in shaping consumers' responses to BA, validating the qualitative findings and extending previous Western research in the Saudi context. The study reveals that BA has a positive influence on purchase intention

under congruent conditions and a negative influence under incongruent conditions, with RVI playing a critical mediating role. Study 2 builds on these frameworks by introducing the concept of IBA and examining whether all value incongruences elicit the same responses. In differentiating between Mild and Severe IBA, the study shows that the severity matters. Specifically, Severe IBA elicits more intense negative reactions, which yield lower purchase intention.

Study 3 builds upon Study 2 by experimentally testing another controversial issue: Saudi Arabia's hosting of public music festivals, thereby increasing the generality of the research. Additionally, the study examines the roles of mediator factors, including cognitive appraisals and coping strategies. The results show that RVI and SIT trigger ROD coping (which reduces purchase intention) while self-dignity encourages forgiveness coping (which mitigates the negative effect). This implies that consumer responses to IBA are not exclusively rejection-based but are subject to various cognitive appraisals and coping strategies. Study 4 builds on these results by examining the key moderating variable, brand origin. In particular, it considers whether consumer responses differ when IBA is initiated by domestic versus foreign brands. The result of the fourth study indicates that while IBA significantly influenced RVI, self-dignity, and SIT, brand origin had no moderating effect.

Together, these four studies provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how Saudi consumers navigate IBA, highlighting the complex interaction between value incongruence, psychological mediators, coping mechanisms, and contextual moderators in affecting consumer behaviour.

# Chapter 9

## Discussion

### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the empirical findings of the thesis in relation to the two research questions, drawing on both the qualitative and quantitative components of the sequential mixed-methods design. It aims to integrate the inductive insights gained from consumer narratives with the deductively tested constructs and relationships observed across the experimental studies. In doing so, the chapter offers a comprehensive understanding of how consumers in a religious and conservative society interpret and respond to BA that is incongruent with their values.

The chapter begins by addressing Research Question 1 (RQ1), which explores how consumers interpret IBA. It reflects on how consumers narratively construct meaning around such activism through moral, religious, and cultural perspectives, leading to diverse emotional and behavioural responses. The discussion then turns to Research Question 2 (RQ2), which builds on the qualitative findings to examine the psychological processes, namely cognitive appraisals and coping strategies, that shape consumer reactions to IBA. Informed by the TTSC, this section interprets the results of the quantitative studies and articulates how consumers' appraisal and coping mechanisms operate in value-sensitive contexts. Finally, the chapter examines the specific role of brand origin, evaluating whether the domestic or foreign nature of the brand affects consumers' reactions to IBA.

### 9.2 Findings Discussion

This section integrates the qualitative and quantitative findings to explain (i) how Saudi consumers interpret and respond to IBA (RQ1), and (ii) how these interpretations translate into appraisal-coping mechanisms that explain purchase intentions (RQ2). Throughout, the discussion highlights how the findings extend BA research beyond Western ideological alignment by foregrounding religiously grounded appraisals (RVI), collective identity threat (SIT), and dignity-based evaluations (self-dignity), as well as two distinct coping routes (ROD coping and forgiveness coping). These integrative insights are revisited in the contributions chapter (see Chapter 10).

## 9.2.1 Consumer Interpretations and Responses of Incongruent Brand Activism (RQ1)

### 9.2.1.1 Consumer Interpretations of Incongruent Brand Activism

One of the central goals of this thesis is to examine how consumers, situated within a religiously traditional culture, interpret and respond to BA when it contradicts religious and cultural norms (i.e., IBA). Specifically, it aims to answer the following research question: RQ1: *1. How do consumers in a religious and conservative society interpret and respond to brand activism that is incongruent with their religious and cultural values? (Qualitative focus).*

It is of paramount importance to note that this thesis distinguishes between consumers' broad interpretive frameworks (i.e., how they narratively perceive and make sense of IBA) and the more specific cognitive appraisals (i.e., how they evaluate IBA's significance for themselves or their group) examined in RQ2. While interpretation helps consumers position IBA in relation to their cultural or moral worldview, cognitive appraisals (as operationalised later) assess the perceived significance or impact of that activism on their well-being. Thus, the interpretations discussed here (e.g., religious value violation, collective identity threat, and personal disrespect) form the foundation for the cognitive appraisal constructs (e.g., RVI, SIT, and self-dignity) tested in the quantitative phase.

As informed through interviews, consumers do not respond to IBA in uniform or binary ways. Rather than completely rejecting brands that engage in value-incongruent activism as reflected in the literature (e.g. Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), consumers engage in diverse meaning-making processes and response patterns. They employ multiple interpretive processes, drawing on religious, cultural, social, and personal perspectives to make sense of the brand's stance. Consumers' interpretations of IBA were therefore shaped by three interrelated dimensions: religious value violation, collective identity threat, and personal disrespect. These interpretations, developed from the qualitative phase and validated in the quantitative studies, represent the primary perceptions through which consumers construct meaning around a brand's activist stance.

First, religious value violation was consistently identified as a dominant filter in interpreting IBA. Many participants viewed IBA messages as clashing with Islamic teachings. Consumers interpreted such messages not merely as moral transgression (Antonetti and Maklan 2016;

Chowdhury et al. 2022) or secular political stances (e.g., Garg and Saluja 2022; Haupt et al. 2023; Tsougkou et al. 2024; Pomerance and Zifla 2025) but as religious violations. Activism that endorsed values explicitly forbidden in Islam (e.g., LGBTQ+ or immodesty) was often perceived as haram (i.e., prohibited) and thereby incompatible with the consumer's Islamic ethical framework (see Section 2.3.2, Introduction to Islamic Values). This interpretation was evident in the interviews and validated and extended across the experimental studies, as consumers who perceive a brand's activism as contradictory to Islamic values (i.e., RVI) consistently show declines in their intention to purchase from that brand.

Notably, the interpretation was not limited to individual religious concerns but extended to group expectations and public religious obligations. Brands that were perceived to be supporting anti-religious content were perceived as going beyond cultural borders and imposing external values onto society. Religious value violation then becomes more than individual dissonance as it is viewed as a transgression with group or even spiritual implications.

This means that for a religious community, aligning brand activist messages with its religious values becomes a key criterion for evaluating the brand. While this finding resonates with the underlying logic of the BA literature on value congruence (e.g., Moorman 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020), it broadens this to include religious values as a prevailing frame of evaluation over Western scholarship, which seeks to place consumer response to BA in terms of political identity or liberal-conservative values (Garg and Saluja 2022; Pöyry and Laaksonen 2022; Haupt et al. 2023; Tsougkou et al. 2024; Pomerance and Zifla 2025). Thus, this study demonstrates that in non-Western contexts, such as the Middle East, religion often serves as the dominant lens through which activism is interpreted. This interpretation was evident through the examination of the RVI construct in the quantitative phase, which shows that consumers consistently react negatively when perceiving IBA as incongruent with their religious values.

This interpretation aligns with recent findings by Mohanty and Chen (2025), who demonstrate that even subtle cues, such as a brand's change of profile picture, can trigger complex interpretive responses from consumers. Their study highlights that consumers actively construct meaning from brand signals, even in the absence of explicit messaging. Building on this, the current research shows that in religious and conservative settings, these

interpretive processes are not only active but deeply rooted in moral and religious evaluation. For instance, even minor symbolic gestures (e.g. changing a brand logo to rainbow colours) were interpreted by many Saudi participants as violations of Islamic teachings. Thus, this study extends Mohanty and Chen's insights by demonstrating that consumers in such contexts do not merely interpret activism through political or ideological frames (e.g., Pomerance and Zifla 2025) but through sacred and communal moral codes that may make the interpretive task even more consequential.

Second, consumers also interpreted IBA through the perspective of collective identity threat. Several participants during the interviews expressed that brands taking controversial stances, especially those perceived as reflecting imported Western values, threatened their identity as members of a morally upright, culturally distinct society. Rather than solely objecting to the specific content of the activism, many consumers saw such activist messages as part of a broader cultural incursion, a challenge to their national and religious identity. This interpretation was empirically verified in Studies 3 and 4 via the construct SIT, as the results demonstrate that IBA positively elicits SIT, which in turn negatively influences consumers' responses.

This also aligns with the broader literature on consumer-based social identity (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Raimondo et al. 2022; Davvetas et al. 2024), yet extends it by showing how BA can be perceived not only as an alignment or misalignment with identity (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020) but as a threat to the cohesion and preservation of cultural fabric. Recent literature supports this interpretation, suggesting that brands engaging in sociopolitical issues may be understood as contributors to cultural discourse and, therefore, may be held accountable when their messages are perceived to challenge or undermine moral or collective norms (Gambetti and Biraghi 2023). Drawing on the brand transgression literature, it is evident that consumers often perceive brand transgressions as threats to their social identity, particularly when such actions conflict with the group's moral or cultural values (Davvetas et al. 2024). Hence, brands engaging in BA may not be rejected simply because of value incongruence (e.g., religious values), but because they are seen as agents of cultural dilution or moral destabilisation. This broader role of collective identity threat, therefore, amplifies the symbolic consequences of IBA and helps explain why activist messages may provoke SIT in morally bounded cultural contexts such as Saudi Arabia.

Third, a more subjective interpretation emerged through the perception of personal disrespect. Specific consumers reported feeling personally offended, ignored, or disrespected when brands demonstrated support for causes that contradicted their own values. Rather than interpreting the incongruent in relation to religious or collective identity, these consumers interpret IBA as a personal attack, an attempt to challenge their personal integrity or to override their values in favour of globalised, progressive agendas. This sense of marginalisation and moral helplessness invoked feelings of shame, frustration, and lower self-worth. Studies 3 and 4 empirically tested and validated this interpretation by showing that IBA affects consumers' perceived self-dignity.

This finding aligns with Haupt et al.'s (2023) results, which show that when consumers feel BA marginalises their values, it negatively affects their brand attitudes. However, it builds on this work by empirically validating self-dignity as a distinct cognitive appraisal mechanism and demonstrating its unique downstream role in fostering forgiveness coping, a response that can sustain consumer-brand relationships despite ideological incongruence. That is, while Haupt et al. identify value marginalisation as a general antecedent to consumer resistance, this thesis provides a process-level explanation for how such marginalisation operates psychologically, revealing that it can lead not only to withdrawal but also to reconciliation, depending on the coping strategy employed.

These findings also resonate with current research in the moral violation and brand transgression literature, which suggests that when consumers perceive brand behaviour as disrespectful or demeaning, they react defensively to protect their self-concept and moral identity (Weitzl et al. 2024). Thus, the interpretation of personal disrespect suggests that consumers' interpretations of IBA are not only mediated by collective identity (Haupt et al. 2023), such as religion or nationality, but can stem from deeply personal evaluations related to dignity, self-respect, and perceived moral worth.

Overall, the findings indicate that consumers interpret IBA through both communal and personal perspectives. While religious value violation and collective identity threat reflect shared, outward-facing interpretations of value conflict, personal disrespect introduces a more private, internalised response. This underscores the multi-layered nature of consumer interpretations in morally sensitive contexts, where value incongruence is experienced both collectively and individually.

### 9.2.1.2 Consumer Responses to Incongruent Brand Activism

The qualitative data also revealed three broad response patterns to IBA: resistance, indifference, and reconciliation. These responses reflect how consumers act after interpreting the brand's activism, whether they feel compelled to disengage, remain detached, or find a way to tolerate the brand's stance.

Resistance was the most anticipated and prevailing response, particularly among individuals who interpreted IBA as contradicting sacred religious beliefs or threatening their collective identity. Consumers demonstrated firm disapproval of the brand, calling for boycotts, and in a few cases, committed themselves to actively cautioning others against supporting the brand. Such responses were typically framed in terms of religious and moral obligation rather than personal preference, given that consumers viewed withdrawal as a task rather than a personal reaction. This response pattern, therefore, informed the inclusion of ROD coping in the quantitative phase, which captures religiously motivated behavioural strategies that lead to a decline in purchase intention. This pattern aligns with evidence in the BA literature, which suggests that value incongruence typically results in backlash or withdrawal (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). This response was also evident and consistent across all experiments, as the purchase intention of many participants was significantly reduced in response to IBA (see the discussion of RQ2).

However, a second group of consumers displayed indifference or emotional detachment in the face of IBA. This response was strongly evident in the interview data. Various participants acknowledged the misalignment between the brand's stance and their own values but did not express strong emotional reactions or behavioural shifts. Some attributed this indifference to habituation or exhaustion, as some individuals have grown accustomed to seeing brands promote controversial causes. Others explained the brand's actions as being guided by market trends or external pressure.

Importantly, such responses reflect a psychological distancing (Maglio 2020), in which the ideological content of the activism is reduced or distanced, allowing the consumer to maintain the brand relationship with minimal internal contradiction (Xie et al. 2024). Wannow et al.'s (2024) findings can explain such responses, as their study shows that strong brand identifiers can exhibit diminished emotional responses to BA even when the brand

positioning conflicts with their own values. This suggests that an established consumer-brand relationship can function as a buffer, enabling consumers to rationalise or distance themselves emotionally from incongruent brand communications (Ahluwalia et al. 2000; Wannow et al. 2024).

Further, Xie and Wei (2025) demonstrate that consumers who fear social exclusion or rejection may also suppress backlash against IBA. They explain that when activism is perceived to align with dominant social norms (e.g., gender equality), opposing consumers may choose to remain silent or emotionally disengaged to avoid social marginalisation. This dynamic is particularly likely when the brand holds a prestigious image, which amplifies consumers' desire to maintain affiliation (Xie and Wei 2025). Hence, although this response type was not directly measured in the quantitative phase, it often reflected a form of pragmatic disengagement, where consumers disagreed with the activism but continued to consume out of perceived necessity or a sense of feeling irrelevant (e.g., Xie et al. 2024). In some cases, it may also reflect a strategy of social self-protection, where consumers avoid outward opposition to prevent exclusion from what is increasingly viewed as a socially accepted norm (Xie and Wei 2025). This response pattern, thus, serves as a middle ground that highlights the complexity and non-binary nature of consumer responses.

Perhaps most interestingly, a third group of consumers responded with reconciliation, choosing to continue supporting the brand despite explicit ideological misalignment. This finding is significant because it challenges the dichotomous "support or reject" model that has dominated the BA literature (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020; Shukla et al. 2024; Xie et al. 2024; Zhao et al. 2024). These consumers made a deliberate decision to overlook the activism, sometimes out of brand loyalty, sometimes due to rational reasons (e.g., lack of expectations), and sometimes because they believed that activism should not necessarily define the brand-consumer relationship.

In some cases, participants explicitly mentioned that although they disagreed with the brand's stance, they did not believe it warranted punishing or ending their engagement with the brand altogether. This signals a tolerant or forgiving capability and suggests that even in highly value-sensitive contexts, customers may also be tolerant or strategically distanced (e.g., Tsarenko and Tojib 2015). Therefore, this response often involved cognitive balancing, acknowledging the conflict but prioritising other brand attributes such as price, quality, or

service. In other cases, forgiveness was linked to the belief that the brand's activism did not reflect its entire identity, or that the issue was not severe enough to warrant complete disengagement. Hence, this form of tolerance informed the construct of forgiveness coping in the quantitative model, where consumers regulate their emotional discomfort and maintain the brand relationship. Studies 3 and 4 examine and affirm this reconciliation response, where some customers exhibit some degree of forgiveness to the brands by maintaining purchase intentions despite being culturally incongruent.

It is essential to distinguish between indifference and reconciliation, as both may involve continued consumption despite ideological conflict but differ in motivation and emotional involvement. Indifference reflects a low-emotion, disengaged stance where the consumer sees the brand's activism as irrelevant or unimportant to their purchasing behaviour. These consumers neither internalise nor emotionally struggle with the activism. In contrast, reconciliation involves an active emotional or cognitive response; consumers acknowledge the value misalignment but justify or suppress their discomfort to preserve the brand relationship. This may be due to brand loyalty, lack of alternatives, or rationalisation of the brand's intent. Thus, while both lead to continued consumption, the former reflects emotional detachment, whereas the latter signals internal negotiation or a process of forgiveness.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that consumers in religious and conservative societies do not respond to IBA in uniform or predetermined ways. Their interpretations are informed by a range of religious and social perceptions, including violations of religious values, collective identity, and personal disrespect. The responses range from resistance to indifference to reconciliation. This variety challenges the prevailing assumption in previous BA research that value incongruence will result in brand rejection (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Instead, it highlights that even when IBA is perceived as culturally or religiously offensive, customers can display such pragmatic or rational responses, depending on the individual's interpretive framework.

Consequently, these insights not only address RQ1 but also directly informed the development of the quantitative model (RQ2), where interpretations were transformed into measurable cognitive appraisals (RVI, SIT, and self-dignity), and coping responses were theorised as ROD coping and forgiveness coping. This progression from meaning-making to

mechanism illustrates the value of a sequential exploratory design in mixed-methods research.

### **9.2.2 Consumer Cognitive Appraisals and Coping Strategies (RQ2)**

While the preceding section (RQ1) explored how consumers interpret IBA in a religious and conservative context, the current section (RQ2) builds on those insights by examining the underlying psychological processes that explain why consumers respond in this manner. Specifically, RQ1 provided a grounded, inductive understanding of how consumers make sense of IBA through religious, social, and personal perceptions. These interpretations informed the identification of three cognitive appraisal mechanisms, RVI, SIT, and self-dignity, which are quantitatively tested here as mediators in the consumer response process. In doing so, RQ2 shifts from conceptual discovery to theory testing, aligning with TTSC to model how consumers appraise ideological dissonance and engage in coping strategies that shape their behavioural outcomes. Drawing on the TTSC (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), these mechanisms are examined through sequential serial mediation analyses across multiple experimental studies, offering process-level evidence of how consumers translate incongruence into action (e.g., resistance responses) or tolerance (e.g., forgiveness).

However, to ensure conceptual clarity and coherence in the transition from the qualitative to quantitative phases, the selection of mediating variables in the experimental studies focused on appraisal and coping constructs that were (1) theoretically central to TTSC, (2) consistently and strongly grounded in the qualitative findings, and (3) analytically tractable for process modelling. Although the qualitative phase revealed a broader spectrum of interpretive themes, such as indifference, emotionally detached responses, and multiple forms of resistance, these themes did not all meet the criteria required for operationalisation within TTSC's appraisal → coping framework.

Instead, three themes emerged as primary appraisal mechanisms: religious value violation, collective identity threat, and personal disrespect. These themes corresponded directly to the theoretical functions of cognitive appraisal in TTSC, evaluating the significance of a stressor in terms of value violation, identity threat, and personal meaning, and were therefore formalised as RVI, SIT, and self-dignity in the quantitative model. Other interpretive themes, such as the source of activism, were contextually important but conceptually peripheral to appraisal severity; thus, they were treated as moderators (Study 4) rather than mediators.

A similar logic guided the selection of coping constructs. While the qualitative findings revealed varied behavioural responses, including indifference, resigned consumption, passive disengagement, resistance, and reconciliation, TTSC requires that coping mechanisms represent functionally meaningful attempts to confront or regulate stress arising from appraisal (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Only two themes consistently fulfilled this requirement: religious-obligation-driven rejection and reconciliation. These directly map onto TTSC's distinction between problem-focused (modifying or avoiding the stressor) and emotion-focused (regulating distress) coping. The former was formalised as ROD coping, a culturally specific expression of problem-focused coping rooted in Islamic duty, while the latter was formalised as forgiveness coping, reflecting consumers' attempts to restore internal equilibrium without severing the brand relationship. This design choice also supports the thesis's central contribution of extending BA research with a process-oriented, culturally grounded appraisal-coping explanation (elaborated in Chapter 10).

Other response types, particularly indifference, did not constitute coping within the TTSC definition because they lacked an active stress-regulation function; instead, they represented low-arousal disengagement or minimal appraisal intensity. Thus, RVI, SIT, self-dignity, ROD coping, and forgiveness coping were selected not only because they were prominent in the qualitative phase, but because they offered the strongest theoretical and empirical grounding for modelling the psychological mechanisms through which IBA affects consumer behaviour. This structure ensures that the model stays true to TTSC, keeps the framework clear and focused, and preserves a transparent linkage between interpretive themes, appraisal mechanisms, and coping pathways across the sequential mixed-methods design.

Thus, the thesis aims to answer the following research questions: RQ2: 2. *What psychological processes do consumers experience when exposed to value-incongruent brand activism, and how do these processes shape their purchase intentions? a) What cognitive appraisals and coping strategies do consumers employ when confronting brand activism that challenges their religious and cultural values? (Quantitative focus).*

#### 9.2.2.1 Consumer Cognitive Appraisals

This subsection focuses on the three focal appraisals and shows how IBA severity translates into distinct cognitive pathways (religious, collective, and dignity-related) that predict

downstream behaviour. Across Studies 3 and 4, cognitive appraisal emerged as a consistent mediator between IBA and consumer purchase intention. Crucially, IBA severity (mild vs. severe) significantly predicted increases in RVI and SIT, which in turn reduced purchase intention (H4a and H4c), confirming the core assumption of TTSC that stressors (e.g., IBA) are first filtered through appraisal processes before they elicit behavioural change. The third appraisal, self-dignity, responded differently. While mild IBA fostered self-dignity, this appraisal led to a more conciliatory coping pathway (H4b), showing that consumers do not necessarily interpret all ideological misalignments as equally threatening or offensive.

These findings advance existing BA research in two ways. First, while past studies have identified value congruence as a key determinant of consumer support (opposition) for BA (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020; Hydock et al. 2020; Shukla et al. 2024), this thesis disaggregates value incongruence into three functionally distinct appraisal constructs, each with its own cognitive and behavioural consequences. This approach is in line with TTSC, according to which individuals appraise stressors for personal concern and potential impact, leading to varied affective responses and coping processes (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Zakowski et al. 2001; Balzarotti et al. 2017).

Second, the results extend TTSC into a culturally embedded and morally sensitive consumer context. Although TTSC has been applied in prior consumer research, particularly within the domains of service failure (e.g., Gelbrich 2010) and customer forgiveness (e.g., Harrison-Walker 2019), its use in BA and ideological incongruence remains limited. Previous studies typically conceptualise coping in relation to emotional recovery after service-based disappointments or interpersonal breaches (Gelbrich 2010; Harrison-Walker 2019). By contrast, this thesis applies TTSC to value-laden brand messaging (i.e., IBA). In this domain, consumer stress emerges not from service failure but from perceived violations of moral, religious, or cultural values.

In doing so, this research introduces culturally grounded primary appraisals, such as RVI and SIT, along with religiously specific coping strategies like ROD coping. This approach demonstrates that consumer appraisals are not only a function of personal threat or emotional imbalance (e.g., Sengupta et al. 2015; Cai et al. 2018), as traditionally explored, but are also shaped by collective identity concerns (e.g., SIT) and sacred value violations (e.g., RVI), particularly in contexts where religion and national culture play central roles in consumer

evaluation. This extension aligns with the literature that has shown how cultural and religious contexts significantly shape stress appraisal and coping mechanisms (Pargament 2001; Kuo 2011; Meca and Schwartz 2024) but goes further in adapting TTSC to the specific tensions introduced by ideologically controversial brand behaviour.

In particular, RVI was a consistent and powerful mediator across studies. As suggested by Studies 1, 3, and 4, the conviction that a brand endorses values that contradict Islamic norms (e.g., gender equality, music festivals, and LGBTQ+ rights) resulted in significantly lower purchase intentions. The result aligns with Tetlock's (2003) concept of sacred values, in which violations of religious or moral taboos elicit non-compensatory judgments and moral outrage. Unlike secular political values, which can be exchanged or justified (Tetlock 2003), religious values, considered by Muslims to be sacred values (Halstead 2007), are regarded as absolutes and not to be exchanged (Halstead 2007; Sheikh et al. 2012). Challenging these values can provoke moral outrage or brand avoidance, which may include religious boycotts or brand hatred (Cruz and Botelho 2015; Faza et al. 2022; Roswinanto and Suwanda 2023). As a result, this thesis applies and expands upon the concept of sacred value protection within the realm of branding, offering a novel explanation for the differing intensity of consumer response to IBA.

In contrast, SIT, while also associated with reduced purchase intention, reflects on a collectivist element of consumer judgment. As Studies 3 and 4 demonstrate, SIT increased significantly when consumers perceived a brand as supporting imported Western values (e.g., music festivals, women's public sports) that conflict with local norms. The notion that brands are a symbol of globalisation or cultural authorities (Gambetti and Biraghi 2023) increased the source perception of threat at the group level (Davvetas et al. 2024), thereby acting to encourage defensive responses against IBA. This finding aligns with social identity research (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Chu et al. 2023) but goes a step further in explaining how IBA is also perceived as a threat to group morality and social cohesion, rather than being merely an individual mismatch. This study thus contributes to a more comprehensive, culturally attuned conceptualisation of BA, particularly in contexts where culture and religion are interdependent identity anchors.

Finally, self-dignity introduced an inwards-looking evaluation process. Unlike RVI or SIT, which manifest in collective or religious discomfort, self-dignity encompasses the personal

sense of being disrespected or morally tainted (Lamberton et al. 2024). Of particular interest, the experiments show that self-dignity is likely to yield constructive emotional regulation since it activates forgiveness coping (H6), which offers a way of reconciliation rather than resistance. The findings demonstrate that when consumers perceive IBA as less violating of their self-dignity (Mild IBA), it opens the path for forgiveness and maintains the consumer-brand relationship. This supports Lamberton et al.'s (2024) conceptualisation of consumer dignity on three levers of recognition, agency, and equality. It posits that when consumers perceive these elements in their interactions with brands, their sense of dignity is affirmed, leading to more favourable responses toward the brand.

This path is also consistent with the broader literature on the distinction between personal and communal scope in brand transgressions. Gerrath et al. (2023) show that personal-scope (e.g., self-dignity) violations evoke stronger emotional reactions than communal-scope ones (e.g., SIT). However, this thesis argues that the personal scope can also become the potential pathway to reconciliation, especially when consumers interpret the brand's activist message as respectful or thoughtful. In other words, personal-scope appreciation through self-dignity can facilitate forgiveness and mitigate negative behavioural outcomes caused by IBA. Ultimately, the personal scope remains a critical domain in consumer-brand dynamics, capable of intensifying offence (Gerrath et al. 2023), but also uniquely positioned to enable cognitive and emotional resolution.

Thus, through testing and verification of self-dignity as a cognitive buffer, this thesis offers an additional contribution to consumer coping and BA literature by theorising a novel psychological route, self-dignity and forgiveness, that reduces the adverse outcomes of perceived value incongruence.

#### 9.2.2.2 Coping Strategies as Mediators of Behavioural Response

This subsection then explains how these appraisals activate two functionally distinct coping routes-value-defensive action (ROD coping) versus emotional regulation and relationship maintenance (forgiveness coping). These coping mechanisms were theorised and confirmed as serial mediators between cognitive appraisals and consumers' responses in Studies 3 and 4 (H5a, H5b, H6).

ROD coping represents a culturally embedded extension of problem-focused coping, whereby Saudi consumers confronted with IBA act in accordance with religious duties rather than merely personal preferences. Unlike typical problem-focused strategies, which are associated with task-oriented, analytical, or rational approaches, such as rational thinking (Duhachek 2005) and positive thinking (Shen 2009), to restore emotional equilibrium (Skinner et al. 2003; Folkman and Moskowitz 2004), ROD coping is anchored in theological doctrine and religious responsibility. In particular, it reflects the Islamic duty to enjoin good and forbid evil, a central religious principle that obliges Muslims to reject and distance themselves from perceived immorality (Meijer 2009; Pieri et al. 2014). This coping, thus, operationalises the Islamic duty to enjoin good and forbid evil, transforming value incongruence into religious action (e.g., Cook 2001; Faza et al. 2022). Hence, when confronted with an IBA that contradicts Islamic norms, Saudi consumers often interpret avoidance and disengagement not as reactive decisions but as acts of spiritual compliance.

The interviews reveal that consumers often justify their rejection of brands by referring to Islamic teachings on moral responsibility. Specifically, the idea is that if one cannot oppose wrongdoing through action or speech, they are religiously obligated to reject it in their heart (Meijer 2009; Pieri et al. 2014). As Wateen (49, female) and Sara (33, female) explained, when "forbidding evil" cannot be done by hand or speech, it must be done in the heart, manifested through withdrawal of support or silent rejection (e.g., purchase intention decreases). This aligns with classical Islamic scholarship, which maintains that the "heart-level" rejection is the duty of ordinary believers, especially in situations where speaking out publicly may not be feasible (Meijer 2009). Thus, ROD coping in this research context reflects a normative, religiously legitimised response pattern that harmonises consumer behaviour with religious accountability.

This religiously grounded coping is activated through two basic appraisal processes: RVI and SIT, both of which were empirically examined in Studies 3 and 4. When consumers interpret that IBA transgresses fundamental Islamic values, it induces a religious violation appraisal (i.e., RVI) that makes passive consumption religiously inappropriate. This extends previous research, as it suggests that sacred values are not negotiated, but rather, they trigger strong protective responses when violated (Tetlock et al. 2000; Graham et al 2009; Islam and Chandrasekaran 2019). Similarly, SIT provokes this coping by reflecting a collective dimension, where IBA is not only regarded as a religious or moral violation, but also a

symbolic attack towards the social and cultural identity of the consumer group (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Davvetas et al. 2024). In these cases, disaffiliation with the brand is not only an indication of personal disapproval but also a religious responsibility to safeguard group integrity.

Both RVI and SIT converge to create a heightened moral and spiritual dissonance, which consumers resolve through ROD coping. This aligns with Abosag and Farah's (2014) observation in the Saudi context, which suggests that religious consumers are not merely expressing disapproval when boycotting but also fulfilling a perceived divine obligation. Similarly, Muhamad et al. (2018) discuss that Muslim consumers' boycotts of immoral brands were driven more by internalised religious values than material or strategic factors. Therefore, through RVI and SIT, consumers appraise IBA as both a spiritual and social transgression, and ROD coping offers a legitimate and expected way to respond. This pathway, thus, explains the processes of consumers' resistance to IBA within a moral-religious framework, extending previous research in the BA literature (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Zhao et al. 2024), religious coping (Pargament 2001; Zwingmann et al., 2011; Bentzen 2021), and religiously motivated consumer behaviour (Vitell et al. 2005; Swimberghe et al. 2011; Waymer and VanSlette 2021; Hyodo and Bolton 2021) into the emerging space of BA.

In contrast to ROD coping, which is rooted in theological duty and expressed through religious resistance, forgiveness coping reflects an emotion-focused strategy through which consumers manage the affective discomfort elicited by ideological incongruence (Tsarenko and Tojib 2011). Rather than confronting the brand or withdrawing, forgiveness coping involves regulating internal distress and sustaining the consumer-brand relationship despite value incongruence (Schnebelen and Bruhn 2018). This coping mechanism emerged empirically in Studies 3 and 4 as a distinct pathway activated through appraisals of self-dignity. This strategy subsequently predicted higher purchase intention, suggesting that reconciliation is a viable alternative to resistance when the perceived IBA is interpreted as personal rather than communal or religious.

Forgiveness coping in this context confirms findings from the qualitative data. It also resonates with findings from the service recovery and transgression literature, where forgiveness has been conceptualised as a mechanism that restores psychological balance and

preserves valued relationships following moral or interpersonal violations (Tsarenko and Tojib 2011; Harrison-Walker 2019). However, this thesis extends that literature by demonstrating that forgiveness coping can also emerge in response to ideological incongruence, not just interpersonal harm, and that such forgiveness is tied to consumers' appraisal of self-dignity, an internalised sense of self-worth and moral identity (Lamberton et al. 2024).

It is also worth noting that forgiveness coping operates in a value-sensitive moral space (Wenzel et al. 2021). Unlike ROD coping, which is dictated by explicit religious obligation, forgiveness emerges in more ambiguous moral territory, where ideological incongruence exists, but not at the level of sacred transgression. This explains why self-dignity, rather than RVI or SIT, serves as its primary antecedent. Self-dignity appraisals capture a subjective sense of personal insult, marginalisation, or value invalidation (Lamberton et al. 2024), which consumers resolve by restoring internal coherence through tolerance or emotional detachment. This process aligns with recent research suggesting that individuals cope with brand transgression not only by resisting the source of dissonance but also through non-confrontational strategies, such as moral reframing (Feinberg and Willer 2019), empathy (Wei et al. 2020), or perceived responsibility (Fehr et al. 2010).

Thus, forgiveness coping in response to IBA offers an essential counterpoint to the dominant narratives in BA research, which often equate value incongruence with consumer backlash (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). This thesis demonstrates that consumers can exercise moral agency not only through resistance but also through self-dignity and forgiveness. In religious and conservative markets, where ideological incongruences may be frequent due to cultural differences with global brands, forgiveness coping provides a meaningful pathway for consumers who wish to maintain brand relationships without compromising moral identity. This form of coping thus functions as an emotion-focused response that is activated by personal, rather than communal or religious, moral appraisals. By enabling emotional reconciliation in the face of ideological tension, it serves as a constructive consumer strategy, one that supports continued brand engagement without eroding internal moral consistency. In doing so, it expands the scope of coping research into religious-ideological domains, offering new insight into how value-driven consumers navigate complex brand relationships in an increasingly polarised marketplace.

Overall, the findings of this thesis demonstrate the value of adopting TTSC as the overarching explanatory lens for understanding consumer responses to IBA. TTSC makes visible the processual nature of consumer reactions, showing that IBA does not directly translate into behavioural outcomes but is first filtered through culturally and religiously grounded cognitive appraisals (RVI, SIT, and self-dignity), which then activate distinct coping strategies (ROD coping or forgiveness coping). This appraisal-coping sequence would be difficult to capture using theories that focus primarily on attitudinal alignment or identity outcomes alone, such as social identity theory or attribution theory (e.g., Flight and Coker 2022; Chu et al. 2023).

Hence, the findings across Studies 2-4 confirm that IBA does not operate as a static stimulus leading to a fixed reaction but instead triggers a sequence of appraisal and coping processes that mediate behavioural intention. The quantitative modelling confirms that IBA is filtered through three culturally shaped appraisal perspectives (RVI, SIT, and self-dignity), each activating different coping routes (ROD or forgiveness), which then lead to either consumer resistance or continued engagement (i.e., forgiveness). Table 56 below provides a summary of how the key insights from the qualitative phase (RQ1) informed the constructs tested in the quantitative phase (RQ2), highlighting the findings of each construct and demonstrating the integrated logic of the thesis's sequential mixed-methods design. Taken together, the RQ1-RQ2 integration shows that IBA operates through culturally specific appraisal and coping processes rather than a simple acceptance-rejection pattern. These integrated insights underpin the theoretical, conceptual, and practical contributions consolidated in Chapter 10.

**Table 56:** Summary of Key Findings Across RQ1 and RQ2

Research Stage	Focus	Construct/Theme Identified	Key Insights
RQ1 (Qualitative)	Interpretation of IBA	Religious Value Violation	Consumers perceive IBA as a religious transgression, not just a moral/political stance.
		Collective Identity Threat	IBA is viewed as a threat to societal and cultural identity, especially when linked to Westernisation.
		Personal Disrespect	Some perceive IBA as personally disrespectful, undermining their moral agency or self-worth.

	Consumer Responses	Resistance, Indifference, Reconciliation.	Participants vary widely: from religious obligation-driven rejection to forgiveness-based tolerance.
RQ2 (Quantitative)	Appraisal Processes	Religious Value Incongruence (RVI)	RVI consistently reduces purchase intention. Seen as a violation of sacred, non-negotiable values.
		Social Identity Threat (SIT)	Perception of IBA as an external cultural threat reduces purchase intention.
		Self-Dignity	Respect to personal moral identity mitigates negative responses and triggers forgiveness-based coping.
	Coping Strategies	Religious Obligation-Driven Coping (ROD)	Withdrawal behaviour, framed as a religious duty, not consumer preference, reducing purchase intention.
		Forgiveness Coping	Consumers resolve personal moral dissonance through forgiveness and continued consumption, increasing purchase intention.

### 9.2.3 The Moderating Role of Brand Origin

An important dimension explored in this research was whether the origin of the brand, domestic versus foreign, moderated consumers' cognitive appraisals of IBA. Based on the qualitative findings and prior literature suggesting that local brands are often held to stricter moral standards due to shared cultural or national identity (e.g., Özsomer 2012; Davvetas et al. 2024; Shukla et al. 2024; Tsougkou et al. 2024; Kuo and Olivia 2025), it was hypothesised (H7) that consumers would react more strongly to IBA when it came from domestic brands, specifically in terms of RVI, SIT, and self-dignity violation. However, the results of Study 4 did not support this hypothesis. Across all appraisal pathways (RVI, SIT, and self-dignity), brand origin did not significantly moderate the relationship between IBA and consumers' cognitive appraisals.

Nonetheless, this finding still provides meaningful insights into the discussion of psychological processing by revealing a boundary condition in the role of brand identity cues. Although brand origin may serve as an element that influences expectations in other dimensions, such as perceived quality (e.g., Balabanis and Diamantopoulos 2004; Oduro et

al. 2024) or cultural credibility (Özsomer 2012; Sayin et al. 2024), its influence appears muted in IBA. This is because in value-sensitive markets like Saudi Arabia, where religious and moral boundaries are deeply embedded in personal and collective identity, consumers appear to judge brand activist messages based on the content of the activism itself, rather than the country of origin of the brand. This indicates that when sacred or culturally non-negotiable values (e.g., religious) are at stake, contextual cues like brand origin are deprioritised in favour of value incongruence. Specifically, factors like religious value congruence, social identity integrity, and self-dignity may serve as predominant standards for evaluation, overriding other situational indicators, such as brand origin.

Thus, these results refine our understanding of appraisal processes by showing that brand origin does not influence how incongruence is perceived, at least not when that incongruence is interpreted as a fundamental threat to one's religious or cultural identity or sense of self. Whether a brand is local or foreign, if its activist message is seen as culturally or morally incompatible, it triggers similar cognitive appraisals. The research findings, therefore, challenge the results found in the literature, which indicate that consumers are more willing to forgive global brands in cases of brand misconduct compared to local ones (Davvetas et al. 2024; Kuo and Olivia 2025). Instead, this thesis proposes that in such high-stakes moral issues (e.g., IBA), the perceived severity of IBA outweighs the perceived proximity or distance of the brand. Pecotich and Rosenthal (2001) demonstrate that country of origin, when considered in isolation, does not exert a significant direct effect on purchase intentions, especially when other more diagnostic attributes, such as quality or brand, are present. In other words, when more diagnostic or meaningful cues are present, such as religious or cultural incongruence, contextual factors like brand origin are deprioritised, as consumers focus more on the substance of the violation rather than its source. As a result, it emphasises the necessity for researchers to reevaluate the presumed universality effect of origin in branding, especially in such value-sensitive or culturally restricted contexts.

However, this outcome may be contextualised by considering the socio-political environment in Saudi Arabia, particularly concerning gender equality initiatives (Study 4). Under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the government has implemented numerous reforms to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. These include increasing women's participation in the workforce, enhancing their roles in leadership positions, and enacting legal reforms to

support their rights (Al Chami and Youssef 2025). Such top-down initiatives signal a strong governmental commitment to these issues.

In this context, local brands operating within Saudi Arabia are likely perceived as aligning with government directives when supporting gender equality initiatives. Consequently, consumers may view local brands' engagement with such issues as expected or mandated, rather than as voluntary or value-driven actions, especially in Saudi Arabia, where there is a restriction on publicly criticising the Saudi government's actions (Al-Saggaf and Weckert 2011). This perception could diminish the impact of brand origin on consumer responses, as the activism is not seen as a distinguishing factor between local and foreign brands. Thus, the absence of a moderating effect from brand origin noted in Study 4 could be due to the predominant impact of government-led initiatives (Sibai et al. 2021) that create uniform expectations for brand activist behaviour regarding social issues such as gender equality. This reflects the importance of considering the government's role in BA strategies (Pimentel et al. 2024) and highlights the necessity of taking into account the wider socio-political context when assessing how brand origin affects consumer perceptions of IBA.

### **9.3 Chapter Summary**

Chapter 9 explores how consumers in a religiously and culturally conservative context respond to IBA. The chapter is structured around the two research questions and an examination of brand origin as a potential moderating factor. The analysis revealed that consumers interpret IBA along three interrelated dimensions. First, they identify religious value violations, viewing certain brand positions as transgressions against sacred Islamic norms rather than simply political or moral stances. Second, consumers perceive collective identity threats, whereby IBA is interpreted as a challenge to societal and cultural values, particularly when linked to Western influences. Third, IBA is sometimes experienced as personal disrespect, undermining the moral agency and self-worth of individual consumers. These qualitative insights revealed a spectrum of consumer responses, ranging from active resistance driven by religious duty to reconciliatory tolerance informed by personal moral respect.

Moreover, cognitive appraisals emerged as critical mediators between IBA and purchase intention. Three appraisal mechanisms, RVI, SIT, and self-dignity, were quantitatively tested

and found to operate differently depending on the severity of the IBA. RVI consistently predicted reduced purchase intention, reflecting consumers' perception of IBA as violating non-negotiable sacred values. SIT also reduced purchase intention, emphasising the perceived threat to collective social and cultural identity when brands supported values seen as imported or foreign. In contrast, self-dignity functioned as a constructive appraisal when IBA was interpreted as mild, enabling consumers to preserve moral coherence and even engage in forgiveness.

These cognitive appraisals subsequently activated distinct coping strategies, which mediated the relationship between appraisal and behaviour. ROD coping was rooted in Islamic duties, motivating consumers to withdraw support from brands in ways that align with moral and religious responsibility. This strategy, activated by both RVI and SIT, reflects a collective and spiritual response rather than purely personal preference. Conversely, forgiveness coping emerged from self-dignity appraisals, allowing consumers to reconcile personal moral discomfort without rejecting the brand entirely. By enabling emotional regulation and reconciliation, forgiveness coping offered a pathway for continued engagement, demonstrating that responses to IBA are not necessarily confrontational or punitive. Overall, the quantitative analyses confirmed that IBA triggers a sequence of appraisal and coping processes that mediate behavioural intentions, with RVI and SIT promoting withdrawal and ROD coping, while self-dignity encourages forgiveness and tolerance.

Finally, Chapter 9 examined the role of brand origin as a potential moderator of these appraisal processes. Contrary to prior expectations and existing literature, the study found that whether a brand was domestic or foreign did not significantly alter the cognitive appraisal of IBA. This finding highlights a boundary condition in which contextual cues, such as brand origin, are deprioritised when consumers evaluate messages that conflict with sacred or culturally non-negotiable values.

# Chapter 10

## Conclusion

### 10.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter synthesises the theoretical and managerial contributions of this thesis, reflecting on the implications of IBA within religious and conservative contexts. Building on empirical evidence collected from Saudi consumers, the chapter situates these findings within broader debates in the literature on BA, sacred values, and consumer coping strategies, illustrating how this research extends prior scholarship into culturally and religiously sensitive markets.

The chapter is organised into three main sections. First, it delineates the theoretical contributions, emphasising the role of religious value, the severity of IBA, and culturally embedded appraisal-coping mechanisms. Second, it outlines managerial implications, offering practical guidance for brands operating in religiously and culturally conservative markets, including strategies for framing activist messaging, respecting sacred values, and fostering consumer tolerance. Finally, the chapter discusses the limitations of the research and identifies avenues for future investigation, including opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons, real-world brand testing, and exploration of additional coping mechanisms. Collectively, this chapter consolidates the thesis's contributions and situates them in both theoretical and practical contexts, providing a roadmap for future research and managerial practice in the domain of BA.

### 10.2 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis makes four interrelated theoretical contributions to the BA and consumer behaviour literature. First, it reconceptualises value incongruence in BA by foregrounding religious values as sacred, non-negotiable sources of consumer-brand conflict in religious and conservative societies. Second, it advances BA theory by differentiating between mild and severe IBA, demonstrating how perceived severity functions as a moral provocation rather than a simple ideological mismatch. Third, it extends TTSC by introducing culturally grounded appraisal and coping mechanisms, namely RVI, SIT, self-dignity, ROD coping, and forgiveness coping, to explain how consumers cognitively process and cope with IBA.

Fourth, it elaborates how some consumers, despite their disagreement, may respond less negatively to IBA through dignity-based appraisals.

The first contribution demonstrates that when a brand takes a stance on a controversial issue, consumers in religious and conservative societies assess not only their own identity/political ideological alignment but also whether the brand's stance violates sacred religious obligations and cultural norms. The thesis extends the notion of value incongruence by identifying religious values as a sacred and morally charged basis for consumer-brand conflict in activism. These sacred values encompass not only personal beliefs but also divine commandments, communal expectations, and theological prohibitions (Halstead 2007; Mathras et al. 2016; Kaur et al. 2024). In other words, violations of religious values are not experienced merely as personal ideological disagreements but as moral and spiritual transgressions that breach divine commandments or societal virtues. Theoretically, it challenges the prevailing assumption in BA research that personal/political ideological misalignment is the dominant source of backlash (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Shukla et al. 2024; Zhao et al. 2024), arguing instead that incongruence with religious value can serve as a more profound, affective, and collectively enforced basis for resistance.

This reconceptualisation of value incongruence reflects why consumer backlash in religious and conservative settings is often more emotionally intense, morally anchored, and socially reinforced (Swimberghe et al. 2011; Roswinanto and Suwanda 2023). Rather than treating misalignment as a purely political or identity-based issue (Hydock et al. 2020; Zhao et al. 2024), this thesis reframes value incongruence grounded in religious and cultural norms, offering a conceptually and empirically grounded refinement that advances BA theory. It shows how brands may unintentionally provoke strong consumer resistance by violating deeply held sacred values, even when their activism appears progressive or well-intentioned. This research, thus, responds to the recent call by As D'Arco et al. (2024) and Verlegh (2024) who suggest that future research should increasingly attend to the roles of religion and cultural specificity in shaping consumer responses to activism, an imperative this thesis begins to fulfil.

The second contribution shows that IBA is not a unidimensional concept that naturally leads to resistance or negative outcomes (e.g., Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Shukla et al. 2024; Zhao et al. 2024). By differentiating between mild vs severe IBA, the thesis demonstrates that not all value-incongruent activism provokes the same reaction. The perceived severity of the

activist message plays a critical role in shaping consumers' appraisals, coping strategies, and behavioural outcomes. This aligns with prior findings that consumers respond more negatively when a brand's perceived transgression is viewed as severe or morally offensive (e.g., Grégoire et al. 2010; Tsarenko and Tojib 2012; Kaur et al. 2024). However, this thesis extends the literature by showing that such responses are not only a matter of perceived impropriety or brand misbehaviour (e.g., El-Manstrly et al. 2021), but are rooted in consumers' interpretation of the severity of the brand's position as a violation of sacred values within the context of BA. This classification of mild vs severe, therefore, challenges the dominant binary approach of alignment vs. misalignment, where congruent activism improves brand attitudes and incongruent stances provoke backlash (e.g., Vredenburg et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020).

Specifically, this thesis demonstrates that severe IBA is more likely to be perceived as violating sacred norms, thereby provoking stronger religious incongruence, higher perceptions of threat, and greater use of religiously motivated coping strategies. Thus, IBA severity activates deeper moral and religious appraisals, rather than simply amplifying a value mismatch (e.g., Zhao et al. 2024). Theoretically, this contribution advances the literature by reframing severity not as an attribute of controversy (e.g., Atanga et al. 2022; Zhao et al. 2024), but rather as a moral provocation, an intensified transgression of sacred religious and cultural boundaries, that drives psychological appraisal and coping response. It shows that even when the issue being addressed remains constant, consumer outcomes vary dramatically depending on whether the brand's stance is interpreted as a moderate divergence (mild) or a direct challenge to religious and cultural norms (severe). Hence, in conservative and religious settings, severity functions as a moral provocation that determines whether activism is perceived as a call for progress or an act of moral violation.

The third contribution lies in uncovering and examining the underlying psychological and social mechanisms that drive such responses to IBA. Specifically, it introduces and empirically tests a sequential explanatory model that incorporates RVI, SIT, self-dignity, ROD coping and forgiveness coping as mediators in the pathway from IBA to negative consumer outcomes. The literature has largely emphasised outcome-level variables, such as boycott intentions (Jungblut and Johnen 2022), purchase intentions (Zhao et al 2024), and word of mouth (Chu et al. 2023), but gives limited attention to the psychological processes through which consumers interpret, evaluate, and ultimately respond to value-incongruent

activism. Although recent studies have begun to explore mechanisms that explain consumer resistance to IBA, they tend to rely on individual mediators, such as perceived sincerity (Atanga et al. 2022), perceived impact (Atanga and Mattila 2023), brand value congruence (D'Arco et al. 2024), authenticity (Chu et al. 2023) or political ideology (Pomerance and Zifla 2025), and often focus on how these variables influence attitude or authenticity judgments. The process-oriented approach, therefore, stands in contrast to prior work that often treats consumer beliefs or attitudes as static predictors, without tracing how they unfold into coping actions (e.g., Atanga et al. 2022; Atanga and Mattila 2023; Chu et al. 2023; D'Arco et al. 2024).

In addition, this sequential explanatory design allows the thesis to build on TTSC by incorporating culturally specific and religiously embedded forms of coping. Specifically, the inclusion of ROD coping bridges the consumer coping literature (Duhachek 2005; Biggs et al. 2017; Schnebelen and Bruhn 2018) with religious behavioural norms, demonstrating that in sacred-value contexts, coping is not only about emotion regulation or problem-solving but may reflect religious and collective moral action. In contrast to typical coping strategies like avoidance or emotion-focused disengagement (Strizhakova et al. 2012; Khamitov et al. 2020; Keeling et al. 2022), ROD coping is problem-focused and value-defensive, aligning with the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil (Hisba) widely practised in Islamic communities (Pieri et al. 2014).

Importantly, this thesis highlights the dual nature of ROD coping; it operates both as a psychological coping mechanism aimed at resolving internal moral dissonance and as a fulfilment of a spiritual and communal duty to defend sacred norms. This duality illustrates that religiously motivated responses are not simply expressions of individual emotional discomfort, but also acts of moral participation, where consumers assume responsibility for upholding community values and divine expectations (Abosag and Farah 2014). It thereby moves beyond the existing focus on ideological alignment or perceived authenticity (e.g., Vredenburg et al. 2020; Chu et al. 2023; Pomerance and Zifla 2025), positioning religious obligation as a central and previously underexplored mechanism in consumer resistance. This reframing allows for a deeper understanding of how consumers in a religious and conservative society perceive it as their personal and communal duty to reject brands that threaten moral norms, as religion governs not only personal identity but collective ethical life (Fam et al. 2004).

Fourth, this thesis advances the literature on BA by introducing a novel pathway that explains how and why consumers may respond less negatively to IBA. While the dominant narrative in BA research focuses on backlash, resistance, and consumer avoidance as primary responses to ideological misalignment (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020; Pöyry and Laaksonen 2022; Zhao et al. 2024), this thesis challenges the dominant assumption that value incongruence necessarily leads to consumer backlash. Instead, it highlights a more nuanced form of consumer resilience, in which individuals reinterpret ideological tension through the perspective of personal dignity and relational moral respect. Specifically, it demonstrates that when activist messages are perceived as mild and respectful, they can invoke a sense of self-dignity in consumers, even in cases where the brand's position contradicts their religious and cultural values.

In such cases, the threat to self is not perceived as hostile or demeaning but as a tolerable challenge to one's worldview, which allows consumers to maintain a sense of autonomy (Lamberton et al. 2024), which preserves their moral identity while still engaging with the brand. This softer form of value violation facilitates a dignity-based appraisal that affirms the consumer's self-worth and reduces the need for defensive or punitive action (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Hence, it activates forgiveness coping, which helps consumers reframe the brand's stance as a well-intentioned difference rather than a direct challenge, ultimately leading to higher purchase intention and continued consumer-brand engagement. Previous research has proposed several factors that can also mitigate the backlash associated with activism, such as issue-brand fit (Vredenburg et al. 2020), the perceived distance between the brand and the activist cause (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), or the sincerity of the brand's motivations (Zhao et al. 2024). However, these studies tend to focus on brand-level variables. This thesis complements and extends those findings by revealing a consumer-side process, self-dignity leading to forgiveness, that helps explain how brands may retain consumers despite value incongruence.

This contribution, therefore, opens the possibility of continued engagement, even among audiences with deeply held religious values. In this sense, this pathway from self-dignity to forgiveness highlights that even in the face of value incongruence, forgiveness can emerge from internal emotional regulation and dignity-based evaluations rather than brand-driven remedial actions, such as brand apologies (Roschk and Kaiser 2013; Wei and Ran 2019) or compensation (Wei et al. 2020). This insight supports the thesis's argument that consumer

reactions to activism are not only about issue agreement but also about relational cues and consumer perceptions. For instance, Vredenburg et al. (2020) note that when brands diverge from social norms in non-threatening ways, consumers may respond with delight as the activism is perceived as a harmless or even acceptable violation. Similarly, studies on consumer personal identity threat suggest that individuals who feel seen and respected are more likely to remain emotionally engaged (Berjot et al. 2012; Rank-Christman et al. 2017). These findings lend indirect support to the dignity-forgiveness pathway proposed in this thesis; however, no one has yet specified or empirically tested this mechanism, especially in the context of BA.

Taken together, these contributions advance a more nuanced understanding of consumer responses to BA in religious and conservative contexts. Rather than viewing such responses as mere ideological disagreements or reactive backlash, this thesis reconceptualises them as complex processes of religious appraisal, value reconciliation, and culturally embedded coping. It shows that the meanings consumers assign to activism are shaped by their religious and communal norms, and culturally anchored expectations of moral conduct. By theorising activism severity as a function of perceived moral violation and illuminating distinct psychological pathways, such as ROD coping and forgiveness coping, this work reframes value incongruence not as a binary outcome of acceptance versus rejection, but as a dynamic interplay of sacred values, cognitive interpretation, and culturally informed coping strategies. In doing so, the thesis extends BA theory into new cultural terrains, offering a model that is both contextually grounded and theoretically generative. It provides future researchers with a framework to examine how cultural value incongruence and religious violation are appraised and resolved by consumers who are not merely political agents, but conservative and religious actors navigating ideological tension within sacred value systems. Table 57 provides a summary of these theoretical contributions.

**Table 57:** Summary of the Key Theoretical Contributions of the Thesis

Contribution	Key Insight	Novelty / Advancement
<b>1. Value incongruence in BA in religious and conservative societies</b>	Consumers assess whether brand activism violates sacred religious obligations and cultural norms, not just personal ideological alignment. Violations are experienced as	Introduces religious values as a sacred, morally charged basis for consumer-brand conflict, extending the concept of value incongruence beyond ideological misalignment. Explains why backlash is more emotionally

	moral and spiritual transgressions.	intense, morally anchored, and socially reinforced.
<b>2. Differentiation of mild vs. severe IBA</b>	Perceived severity of brand activism shapes cognitive appraisals, coping strategies, and behavioural outcomes. Severe IBA triggers stronger religious incongruence and coping responses.	Challenges the binary alignment vs. misalignment framework, reframing severity as moral provocation that intensifies religious and cultural appraisals rather than simply amplifying value mismatch.
<b>3. Sequential appraisal-coping model</b>	IBA is first appraised for religious, social, or personal relevance (RVI, SIT, self-dignity), then managed through coping mechanisms (ROD coping, forgiveness coping), shaping behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention.	Introduces a process-oriented, culturally grounded model, showing how cognitive appraisals and coping mechanisms mediate the pathway from IBA to consumer response, moving beyond static predictors of backlash.
<b>4. Self-dignity and forgiveness pathway</b>	When IBA is mild and morally respectful, self-dignity enables forgiveness coping, allowing continued engagement without compromising moral identity.	Reveals a consumer-side mechanism for resilience, where internalised dignity and relational moral evaluation facilitate forgiveness, complementing brand-level mitigation strategies.

### 10.3 Managerial Implications

This thesis offers four key managerial contributions for brands engaging in BA in religious and conservative markets. First, it provides guidance on framing activist messages to minimise the perceived severity of IBA by demonstrating cultural and religious sensitivity in symbolic cues and representations. Second, it highlights the importance of careful language selection to avoid unintended sacred value violations while advocating for social causes. Third, it emphasises the role of consumer autonomy and dignity in mitigating backlash, recommending strategies that allow consumers space to disengage quietly from incongruent activism. Fourth, it advocates for systematic cultural auditing and psychographic segmentation to tailor activism strategies to local religious norms and heterogeneous consumer coping orientations.

The first managerial contribution advises brands to frame activist messaging with cultural awareness, particularly around symbolic representations that could trigger sacred value violations. The findings show that consumer backlash intensifies not from the cause itself but from its perceived severity as a moral provocation. For example, in the Saudi context, supporting women's participation in sports may elicit milder reactions if depicted respectfully

(e.g., athletes in loose, modest clothing) compared to portrayals using tight or revealing attire, even though the underlying issue remains identical. Managers can thus reduce resistance by maintaining activism on progressive issues while embedding visual and narrative cues that align with local norms of modesty and religious propriety. This approach allows brands to pursue social advocacy without unnecessarily escalating perceived value incongruence into severe backlash.

The second contribution underscores the critical role of language and terminology in shaping consumer interpretations of activism. Terms that appear neutral or progressive in one cultural context may be perceived as direct challenges to religious teachings in another. For instance, framing gender-related activism around "equality" risks being interpreted by some Saudi consumers as conflicting with Islamic principles, whereas "empowerment" or "opportunity" may signal respect for local values. Brands should therefore conduct thorough pre-testing of messaging to identify terms or phrases that might evoke symbolic threats to sacred norms. By selecting language that conveys advocacy without implying rejection of religious or cultural frameworks, managers can lower the likelihood of severe appraisals and subsequent resistance.

The third contribution demonstrates how preserving consumer dignity and autonomy can foster tolerance and forgiveness, even amid disagreement. When activism feels imposing, such as decorating an entire store with pride flags, leaving little room for quiet disengagement, religious consumers may perceive a threat to their moral agency, prompting stronger defensive responses. In contrast, optional engagement (e.g., limited-edition rainbow products that consumers can choose to purchase or ignore) respects personal dignity and allows individuals to maintain self-worth without feeling cornered. Managers should thus design activism implementations that provide "exit options" and avoid blanket exposure, enabling dignity-based appraisals that lead to continued brand relationships despite value incongruence.

The fourth contribution calls for embedding cultural intelligence into BA planning through routine cultural auditing, stakeholder consultation, and psychographic segmentation. Religious and cultural values function as central organising principles in consumer decision-making in these markets (Fam et al. 2004), driving responses ranging from religiously obligated disengagement (ROD coping) to forgiveness coping. Brands, regardless of local or foreign origin, cannot assume automatic trust or tolerance; instead, they must actively

demonstrate moral sensitivity. This includes engaging local religious and cultural advisors, pre-testing campaigns for perceived severity and dignity threats, and recognising intra-market heterogeneity (e.g., varying tolerance thresholds). Such practices enable culturally adaptive activism that balances global advocacy with local respect, enhancing commercial sustainability.

Taken together, these managerial contributions provide a practical roadmap for implementing BA in religious and conservative contexts without abandoning activist commitments. Brands can navigate ideological tensions by prioritising respect, cultural sensitivity, and consumer agency, transforming potential backlash into opportunities for sustained engagement and long-term brand legitimacy.

## 10.4 Research Limitations and Future Research

This thesis provides important insights into how consumers in a religious and conservative society respond to IBA. However, several limitations are worth consideration and open pathways for future research.

First, the study's findings are drawn exclusively from Saudi consumers, all of whom are Muslim, representing a highly specific socio-religious context. While this allowed for a rich, culturally deep exploration of IBA, it limits generalisability to other research contexts. Consumers from other religious backgrounds or more secular societies may appraise and cope with IBA differently. Moreover, while this thesis focuses on a religious and conservative, Islamic context in which sacred values are explicitly rooted in religious doctrine and cultural norms, the conceptual framework developed here may extend to other societies where certain values, religious or otherwise, are regarded as sacred. Durkheim (1973) observed that even in advanced secular societies, people often treat core moral values with a “transcendental quality” that resists utilitarian trade-offs, provoking moral outrage and demands for sanction when violated (Tetlock et al. 1996).

Similarly, Tetlock (2003) notes that sacred values, whether tied to faith, national identity, human rights, or environmental protection, are shielded by a “moral mandate” that frames violations as unacceptable, regardless of potential material benefits. Future research could therefore test the applicability of this model in secular contexts, examining whether activism that challenges such secular-sacred values (e.g., climate change denial, threats to free speech)

triggers similar appraisal and coping processes as observed here. This would not only expand the scope of BA and sacred value theory in consumer behaviour but also demonstrate the portability of the present framework across cultural and ideological settings.

In addition, building on the detailed contextualisation of the Saudi setting in Chapters 1 and 2, where sacred religious values are portrayed as non-negotiable, collectively enforced, and deeply intertwined with cultural norms and Islamic doctrine (e.g., modesty, divine commandments, and the principle of *Hisba*), the findings of this thesis are most likely to generalise to other religious and conservative societies in which similar sacred-value systems predominate. This includes other Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Egypt) and conservative religious contexts dominated by other faiths (e.g., evangelical Christian, Latin America, Orthodox, or Jewish communities), where violations of religiously grounded moral boundaries are more likely to be appraised as profound moral provocations rather than mere ideological differences. The framework may also extend to non-Western conservative societies where collective cultural values carry sacred-like protection even if not explicitly religious (e.g., Confucian-influenced East Asian markets or nationalist contexts in which national identity is treated as inviolable). Importantly, across these contexts, the key point of generalisation lies not in the specific values themselves, but in the appraisal-coping sequence identified through TTSC, whereby violations of sacred or protected values are first cognitively appraised and then managed through culturally grounded coping strategies.

Conversely, caution is warranted when applying these insights to secular Western settings, where sacred values are more likely to centre on individual rights, environmentalism, or progressive social norms rather than religious doctrine, potentially leading to different appraisal and coping patterns. Generalisation should also be approached cautiously across dominant religions with differing theological emphases (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism) or in contexts where activism involves real rather than fictitious brands, as pre-existing brand relationships and emotional attachments may moderate the severity of perceived violations and the activation of religiously motivated coping strategies.

Second, similar to many consumer psychology studies, the use of fictitious brands and scenario-based experiments, while methodologically necessary to control for brand familiarity and prior attitudes (Barbarossa and Mandler 2021; Sayin et al. 2024), may reduce

ecological validity (El Hedhli et al. 2021). Also, while the vignettes were carefully crafted and pre-tested, they may not fully capture the complexity or emotional aspect related to activism in real-world settings. Yet, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) argue that consumers' responses to BA for fictitious and real brands generate similar outcomes. However, in real-life scenarios, established brand relationships, reputations, and emotional attachments may shape how activism is interpreted and responded to (e.g., Wannow et al. 2024). Follow-up research could replicate the experimental design with real brands of varying levels of consumer attachment or adopt longitudinal or field-based designs to see whether the outcomes generalise to naturalistic brand-consumer situations or to observe how responses to IBA evolve.

Third, this thesis concentrated primarily on the negative or resistant reactions triggered by value-incongruent activism. While this focus addresses an underexplored “dark side” of BA, it did not fully explore the psychological processes through which consumers arrive at positive outcomes. Yet, Study 1 found that when BA aligned with Saudi traditional values, purchase intention significantly increased, indicating that positive effects are also possible. Since self-dignity was found to reduce negative outcomes in this thesis, it would be worthwhile to explore whether it also promotes positive moral affirmation or loyalty when consumers perceive value congruence. Therefore, future research may investigate what psychological mechanisms, such as respect for self-dignity or perceived sacrifice, foster supportive reactions.

Fourth, while this thesis identified ROD coping and forgiveness coping as central strategies through which consumers respond to IBA, these are unlikely to be exhaustive. Qualitative data revealed other nuanced reactions, such as emotional detachment, rationalisation, or partial boycott. As an example, one of the participants described stifling purchases only in periods that LGBTQ+ support was overtly marketed: “I don't think I will completely cut them off 100%, just as soon as the logos disappear... I will buy from them again.” These findings suggest the presence of intermediate or situation-contingent coping strategies, deserving further empirical examination. Moreover, future research could explore additional appraisal types, such as perceived intentionality, moral reasoning strategies, or value sacredness, that may predict tolerance or forgiveness in ideologically charged brand encounters.

Fifth, while brand origin had been considered to act as a moderator of consumer response, Study 4 found no significant effect. This, as noted earlier, is potentially because of the socio-political context in Saudi Arabia (Sibai et al. 2021), where state-backed initiatives (e.g., Vision 2030) have institutionalised domestic support for progressive causes such as women's empowerment as the norm. Given such an environment, domestic BA can be viewed as mandatory rather than voluntary, suggesting the probable effect of origin on appraisals as insignificant and mild. While this thesis does not empirically test political influence, subsequent studies could more directly examine the moderating effect of government congruence, institutional pressure, or perceived voluntariness on consumer responses to activism, particularly in non-democratic or state-influenced countries.

Sixth, several participants state that they continued to engage with brands with which they ideologically disagree because of perceived utilitarian good or other social contributions. One of the respondents said: "It supports LGBT communities with a portion of its profits, but that does not mean necessarily that all the profits are locked away for them... it must have other human aspects." It demonstrates that customers may be evaluating activism alongside other brand attributes, such as product quality or CSR efforts, leading to a trade-off that softens backlash. This raises an attractive possible opportunity for future research on whether positive brand activities, such as sustainability, philanthropy, or CSR initiatives, can offset or mitigate the risk of IBA.

Finally, while the analysis shows that the indirect effect of IBA on purchase intention via self-dignity and forgiveness coping is statistically the strongest, this thesis does not aim to compare the relative strength of mediators. The research was designed to explore and validate distinct psychological mechanisms, each rooted in specific types of appraisal and coping, rather than to determine which pathway exerts the most influence. For example, RVI was theorised to trigger ROD, while self-dignity was linked to forgiveness coping, based on qualitative insights and theory-driven pairings. Comparing these mediators would require a model structured to test cross-path relationships (e.g., RVI → forgiveness; self-dignity → ROD), which lies beyond the scope of this study. Future research could extend this model to explore such relationships and assess the relative explanatory power of each pathway.

In summary, while this thesis presents a robust and cultural framework to account for the way consumers approach and cope with BA against their religious and cultural values, it also

presents important questions for future scholarship. Through research of other cultures, real brands, other coping strategies, the buffering effects of broader brand characteristics, and the role of sacred values in both religious and secular contexts, future research can continue to develop theoretical and applied insights into this rapidly evolving field.

## 10.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter concludes the thesis by summarising its key contributions, managerial insights, and limitations. This thesis makes two key theoretical contributions to the literature on BA in religious and conservative contexts. First, it demonstrates that value incongruence is not merely an ideological mismatch but a violation of sacred religious and cultural norms, which evokes stronger moral, emotional, and socially reinforced consumer resistance than previously identified in Western or politically pluralistic settings. By distinguishing between mild and severe activism, the study shows that consumer reactions depend on the perceived severity of the violation, with severe IBA triggering heightened religious incongruence, perceived threat, and obligation-driven coping. Second, the research uncovers the psychological and social mechanisms underlying these responses, framing IBA as a stressor appraised through RVI, SIT, and self-dignity, and managed via coping strategies such as ROD and forgiveness coping. Importantly, it identifies a novel pathway in which consumers can maintain engagement despite value incongruence; that is, when activism is perceived as morally respectful, dignity-based appraisals activate forgiveness coping, allowing continued brand interaction. Together, these contributions reconceptualise consumer responses to IBA as culturally and morally embedded processes of appraisal, coping, and value reconciliation, extending BA theory into sacred-value contexts and offering a framework for understanding how consumers navigate ideological tension beyond simple acceptance or backlash.

From a managerial perspective, the research underscores the importance of culturally sensitive activism. Brands must carefully consider symbolic cues, language, and framing when addressing controversial issues, ensuring that activism is perceived as respectful and inclusive rather than morally provocative. The findings highlight that sacred value violations, even when subtle, can significantly amplify consumer resistance, while strategies that preserve consumer dignity and autonomy can mitigate backlash and foster continued engagement. Additionally, the study challenges assumptions about the protective effects of

brand origin, demonstrating that both local and foreign brands must actively demonstrate moral and cultural sensitivity to maintain legitimacy.

Finally, the chapter acknowledges the study's limitations, including its focus on Saudi consumers, the use of fictitious brands, and the emphasis on negative responses to IBA. Future research could extend these findings by exploring other religious or secular contexts, real brands, additional coping strategies, and the potential buffering effects of positive brand attributes, such as CSR initiatives. Overall, this chapter consolidates the contributions of the thesis, offering a nuanced, culturally grounded understanding of consumer responses to brand activism and providing both theoretical and practical pathways for advancing scholarship and practice in this domain.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethical Approval for Interview

Dear Abdulrahman Almuajel,

**Research project title:** The effect of brand activism on Saudi customer engagement, self-brand connection, and brand usage intent.  
**SREC reference:** 1717

The School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) reviewed the above application via its proportionate review process.

### **Ethical Opinion**

The Committee gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above application on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation.

### **Additional approvals**

This letter provides an ethical opinion only. You must not start your research project until all any other approvals required for your research project (where relevant) are in place.

### **Amendments**

Any substantial amendments to documents previously reviewed by the Committee must be submitted to the Committee via CARBS-ResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk for consideration and cannot be implemented until the Committee has confirmed it is satisfied with the proposed amendments.

You are permitted to implement non-substantial amendments to the documents previously reviewed by the Committee but you must provide a copy of any updated documents to the Committee via CARBS-ResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk for its records.

### **Monitoring requirements**

The Committee must be informed of any unexpected ethical issues or unexpected adverse events that arise during the research project.

The programme director would include your research in end of project report. The Committee must be informed when your research project has ended. This notification should be made to CARBS-researchethics@cardiff.ac.uk within three months of research project completion.

### **Documents reviewed by the Committee**

The documents reviewed by the Committee were:

Application ID: 1717

[Link to applications list, where you can access the reviewed version.](#)

13D-CARBS SREC application form (version 5).docx

Blackboard Learn.pdf

CARBS Research Ethics Protocols.docx

Interview questions.docx

SREC-New feedback form - July 2021 version(3).docx

Template Consent Form.docx

Template Participant Information Sheet.docx

### **Complaints/Appeals**

If you are dissatisfied with the decision made by the Committee, please contact Dr Carmela Bosangit (BosangitC@cardiff.ac.uk) in the first instance to discuss your complaint. If this discussion does not resolve the issue, you are entitled to refer the matter to the Head of School for further consideration. The Head of School may refer the matter to the University Research Integrity and Ethics Committee (URIEC), where this is appropriate. Please be advised that URIEC will not normally interfere with a decision of the Committee and is concerned only with the general principles of natural justice, reasonableness and fairness of the decision.

Please use the Committee reference number on all future correspondence.

**The Committee reminds you that it is your responsibility to conduct your research project to the highest ethical standards and to keep all ethical issues arising from your research project under regular review.**

**You are expected to comply with Cardiff University's policies, procedures and guidance at all times, including, but not limited to, its [Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research involving Human Participants, Human Material or Human Data](#) and our [Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice](#) .**

Yours sincerely,

Dr Carmela Bosangit  
Chair of School Research Ethics Committee

## Appendix B: Ethical Approval for The Experiments

Dear Abdulrahman Almuajel,

**Research project title:** Navigating brand activism: Understanding consumers responses and coping mechanisms in the case of religious value-incongruence in Saudi Arabia context.  
**SREC reference:** 2733

The School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) reviewed the above application via its proportionate review process.

### **Ethical Opinion**

The Committee gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above application on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation.

### **Additional approvals**

This letter provides an ethical opinion only. You must not start your research project until all any other approvals required for your research project (where relevant) are in place.

### **Amendments**

Any substantial amendments to documents previously reviewed by the Committee must be submitted to the Committee via [CARBS-ResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:CARBS-ResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk) for consideration and cannot be implemented until the Committee has confirmed it is satisfied with the proposed amendments.

You are permitted to implement non-substantial amendments to the documents previously reviewed by the Committee but you must provide a copy of any updated documents to the Committee via [CARBS-ResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:CARBS-ResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk) for its records.

### **Monitoring requirements**

The Committee must be informed of any unexpected ethical issues or unexpected adverse events that arise during the research project.

The programme director would include your research in end of project report. The Committee must be informed when your research project has ended. This notification should be made to [CARBS-researchethics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:CARBS-researchethics@cardiff.ac.uk) within three months of research project completion.

### **Documents reviewed by the Committee**

The documents reviewed by the Committee were:

Application ID: 2733

[Link to applications list, where you can access the reviewed version.](#)

Blackboard Learn.pdf

CARBS Ethics application form (version 6)- updated.docx

CARBS Ethics application form (version 6).docx

CARBS Research Ethics Protocols.docx

Experiment – Development - updated- version 2.docx

Experiment – Development - updated.docx

Participant Information Sheet- version 2.docx

Participant Information Sheet.docx

Recruitment Adverts.pdf

SREC-New feedback form - July 2021 version(3).docx

Template Consent Form.docx

Template Consent Form-version 2.docx

### **Complaints/Appeals**

If you are dissatisfied with the decision made by the Committee, please contact Dr Carmela Bosangit ([BosangitC@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:BosangitC@cardiff.ac.uk)) in the first instance to discuss your complaint. If this discussion does not resolve the issue, you are entitled to refer the matter to the Head of School for further consideration. The Head of School may refer the matter to the University Research Integrity and Ethics Committee (URIEC), where this is appropriate. Please be advised that URIEC will not normally interfere with a decision of the Committee and is concerned only with the general principles of natural justice, reasonableness and fairness of the decision.

Please use the Committee reference number on all future correspondence.

**The Committee reminds you that it is your responsibility to conduct your research project to the highest ethical standards and to keep all ethical issues arising from your research project under regular review.**

**You are expected to comply with Cardiff University's policies, procedures and guidance at all times, including, but not limited to, its [Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research involving Human Participants, Human Material or Human Data](#) and our [Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice](#).**

Yours sincerely,

Dr Carmela Bosangit

Chair of School Research Ethics Committee

## Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet for The Interview



Appendix 3

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### **The effect of brand activism on Saudi customer engagement, self-brand connection, and brand usage intent.**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others, if you wish.

Thank you for reading this.

#### **1. What is the purpose of this research project?**

This is a student project for my PhD study at Cardiff University, Cardiff Business School. It aims to explore the perceptions of Saudi consumers toward brands that engage controversial issues (e.g., LGBT and women empowerment). The outcomes of this project should help create a better understanding of what Saudis consumers think of these brands' engagements.

#### **2. Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited because you are a citizen of Saudi and age over 18 years old.

#### **3. Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, we will discuss the research project with you and ask you to sign a consent form. If you decide not to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons and it will not affect your legal rights.

You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in the research project at any time, without giving a reason, even after signing the consent form.

#### **4. What will taking part involve?**

This will involve a one-off face-to-face interview (or online via Zoom) that is approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be about a discussion of certain brands' activities, such as women empowerment and LGBT+ rights and what your thoughts on these activities are. The interview will be recorded and accessed only by the researcher. The purpose of the recording is g is mainly to ensure a 100% accurate transcript and will be deleted once transcribed via Otter app.

#### **5. Will I be paid for taking part?**

No. You should understand that any data you give will be as a gift and you will not benefit financially in the future should this research project lead to the development of a new treatment/method/test/assessment.

#### **6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

[Version 2] [

Date 15/5/2023]

There will be no direct advantages or benefits to you from taking part, but your contribution will help us understand what Saudi customers think of brands taking stands in controversial issues. This would help both academic researchers and business practitioners to understand Saudi consumer's mind.

**7. What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There is no any kind of risk on taking part.

**8. Will my taking part in this research project be kept confidential?**

All information collected from (or about) you during the research project will be kept confidential and any personal information you provide will be anonymised and managed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please see 'What will happen to my Personal Data?' (below) for further information.

**9. What will happen to my Personal Data?**

Cardiff University is the Data Controller and is committed to respecting and protecting your personal data in accordance with your expectations and Data Protection legislation. Further information about Data Protection, including:

- your rights
- the legal basis under which Cardiff University processes your personal data for research
- Cardiff University's Data Protection Policy
- how to contact the Cardiff University Data Protection Officer
- how to contact the Information Commissioner's Office

may be found at <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/data-protection>

After transcribing the data, the researcher will anonymise all the personal data it has collected from, or about, you in connection with this research project, with the exception of your consent form that only includes details of your age and level of education. Your consent form details of your age and level of education will be retained in accordance with the University Records Retention Schedules and may be accessed by members of the research team and, where necessary, by members of the University's governance and audit teams or by regulatory authorities. Anonymised information will be kept in accordance with the University Records Retention Schedules but may be published in support of the research project and/or retained indefinitely, where it is likely to have continuing value for research purposes.

Note that it will not be possible to withdraw any anonymised data that has already been published (such as such as journals) or in some cases, where identifiers are irreversibly removed during the course of a research project, from the point at which it has been anonymised.

**10. What happens to the data at the end of the research project?**

The data would not be used or shared to other researchers/parties. The researcher may use the data in the future only for academic publishing, such as journals.

**11. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The main purpose of the research results is to help obtain a PhD degree at Cardiff University. It is expected that by September 2025, the project will end, and the project results be published by Cardiff University. Also, it is my intention to publish the results of this research project in academic journals. However, while the researcher may use verbatim quotes from participants, the participants will not be identified in any report, publication, or presentation.

**12. What if there is a problem?**

If you wish to complain or have grounds for concerns about any aspect of the manner in which you have been approached or treated during the course of this research, please contact Abdulrahman Almuajel, [almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk). If your complaint is not managed to your satisfaction, please contact Dr Carmela Bosangit, Chair of School Research Ethics Committee [bosangitc@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:bosangitc@cardiff.ac.uk).

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, you may have grounds for legal action, but you may have to pay for it.

**13. Who is organising and funding this research project?**

The research is organised by Abdulrahman Almuajel (PhD student), Dr Zoe Lee, and Dr Carmela Bosangit from Cardiff Business School in Cardiff University. No particular fund is applied.

**14. Who has reviewed this research project?**

This research project has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the CARBS Research Ethics Committee in Cardiff University.

**15. Further information and contact details**

Should you have any questions relating to this research project, you may contact us during normal working hours:

Abdulrahman Almuajel  
Cardiff, UK.  
Phone: 07830698664  
Email: [almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk)  
PhD Student  
Marketing & Strategy Department  
Cardiff Business School  
Cardiff University

**Thank you for considering to take part in this research project. If you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records.**

## Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet for The Experiments



Appendix 3

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Navigating brand activism: Understanding consumers responses and coping mechanisms in the case of religious value-incongruence in Saudi Arabia context.**

**SREF REFERENCE NUMBER AND COMMITTEE: 2733**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others, if you wish.

Thank you for reading this.

**1. What is the purpose of this research project?**

This is a research project for my PhD study at Cardiff University, Cardiff Business School. It aims to explore the perceptions of Saudi consumers toward brand's information and general activity, such as advertisement, on Saudi consumer responses. The outcomes of this project should help create a better understanding on how Saudi consumers are affected by this information and activity.

**2. Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited because you are a citizen of Saudi and are over 18 years old.

**3. Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you will answer different questions related to the project and provide your consent by completing a consent form. If you decide not to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons and it will not affect your legal rights.

You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in the research project at any time, without giving a reason, even after completing the consent form.

**4. What will taking part involve?**

This will involve a survey where participants will be answering different multiple-choice questions which will take approximately around 10 minutes. The questions will be about certain brands' activities, and what your thoughts of these activities are.

**5. Will I be paid for taking part?**

No. You should understand that any data you give will be as a gift and you will not benefit financially in the future should this research project lead to the development of a new treatment/method/test/assessment.

**6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There will be no direct advantages or benefits to you from taking part, but your contribution will help us understand the mentality of Saudi customers and their reactions. This would help both academic researchers and business practitioners to understand Saudi consumer's mind.

**7. What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There is no any kind of risk on taking part.

[Version 2]

[Date 04/12/2024]

**8. Will my taking part in this research project be kept confidential?**

All information collected from (or about) you during the research project will be kept confidential and any personal information you provide will be anonymised and managed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please see 'What will happen to my Personal Data?' (below) for further information.

**9. What happens to the data at the end of the research project?**

The data would not be used or shared to other researchers/parties. The researcher may use the data in the future only for academic publishing, such as journals.

**10. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The main purpose of the research results is to help obtain a PhD degree at Cardiff University. It is expected that by September 2025, the project will end, and the project results be published by Cardiff University. Also, it is my intention to publish the results of this research project in academic journals. However, the participants will not be identified in any report, publication, or presentation.

**11. What if there is a problem?**

If you wish to complain or have grounds for concerns about any aspect of the manner in which you have been approached or treated during the course of this research, please contact Abdulrahman Almuajel, [almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk). If your complaint is not managed to your satisfaction, please contact Dr Carmela Bosangit, Chair of School Research Ethics Committee [bosangitc@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:bosangitc@cardiff.ac.uk).

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, you may have grounds for legal action, but you may have to pay for it.

**12. Who is organising and funding this research project?**

The research is organised by Abdulrahman Almuajel (PhD student), Dr Zoe Lee, and Dr Carmela Bosangit from Cardiff Business School in Cardiff University. The funding of this project is mainly from the Saudi Arabia Cultural Bureau (SACB).

**13. Who has reviewed this research project?**

This research project has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the CARBS Research Ethics Committee in Cardiff University.

**14. Further information and contact details**

Should you have any questions relating to this research project, you may contact us during normal working hours:

Abdulrahman Almuajel  
Cardiff, UK.  
Phone: 07830698664  
Email: [almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:almuajelaa@cardiff.ac.uk)  
PhD Student  
Marketing & Strategy Department  
Cardiff Business School  
Cardiff University

**Thank you for considering to take part in this research project. If you decide to participate, you may print or save the Participant Information Sheet to keep for your records.**

## Appendix E: Consent Form for The Interview



Appendix 4

Participant ID no:  
*Do not include box for  
anonymised samples*

### CONSENT FORM

**Title of research project:** The effect of brand activism on Saudi customer engagement, self-brand connection, and brand usage intent.

SREC reference and committee: [Insert SREC reference and committee or other relevant reference numbers]

Name of Chief/Principal Investigator: Abdulrahman Almuajel, Dr Zoe Lee, and Dr Carmela Bosangit.

Please  
initial box

I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated [15/5/2023] version [2] for the above research project.	
I confirm that I have understood the information sheet dated [15/5/2023] version [2] for the above research project and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without any adverse consequences (e.g. to medical care or legal rights, if relevant). I understand that if I withdraw, information about me that has already been obtained may be kept by Cardiff University.	
I understand that data collected during the research project may be looked at by individuals from Cardiff University or from regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in the research project. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	
I consent to the processing of my personal information of my age and level of education for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be held in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation and in strict confidence, unless disclosure is required by law or professional obligation.	
I understand who will have access to personal information provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the research project.	
I consent to being audio recorded for the purposes of the research project and I understand how it will be used in the research.	
I understand that anonymised excerpts and/or verbatim quotes from my interview may be used as part of the research publication.	

Version xx

[DATE]

## Appendix F: Consent Form for The Experiments



Appendix 4

Participant ID no:  
*Do not include box for  
anonymised samples*

### CONSENT FORM

**Title of research project:** Navigating brand activism: Understanding consumers responses and coping mechanisms in the case of religious value-incongruence in Saudi Arabia context.

SREC reference and committee: [2733]

Name of Chief/Principal Investigator: Abdulrahman Almuajel, Dr Zoe Lee, and Dr Carmela Bosangit.

Please  
initial box

I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated [04/12/2024] version [2] for the above research project.	
I confirm that I have understood the information sheet dated [04/12/2024] version [2] for the above research project and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without any adverse consequences (e.g. to medical care or legal rights, if relevant). I understand that if I withdraw, information about me that has already been obtained may be kept by Cardiff University.	
I understand that data collected during the research project may be looked at by individuals from Cardiff University or from regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in the research project. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	
I understand how the findings and results of the research project will be written up and published.	
I am a Saudi citizen over 18 years old, and I consent to take the survey?	

**THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN OUR RESEARCH**

**YOU MAY PRINT OR SAVE THE CONSENT FORM TO KEEP FOR YOUR RECORDS.**

Version xx

[DATE]

## Appendix G: Interview Guide

Section	Question	Follow up	Note
Warming up	1. What makes a brand attractive/not attractive to you? And why?		
	2. What do you think of brands that have social contributions?	a. If good, why do you think it is good? In what ways can brands socially contribute? Can you think of an example? b. If bad, why brands should not participate in community service? c. How do you view this brand? What is your impression of it? Does a brand's support for its community affect the way you deal with it? How? And why?	
Main questions	3. What comes to your mind when you hear the word “activism”? Why?	a. Can you think of an example? b. Do you think activism is important? Why?	
	4. What do you <u>think</u> of brands that participate or support controversial issues?	a. Do you think brands should take a stand on a controversial issue? Why?	- Provide a definition of controversial issues - with examples if needed. - Participants' perceptions.
	5. What do you <u>feel</u> about brands that participate or support controversial issues?	a. What makes you feel that way?	- Participants' emotion.
	6. Do you think your <u>interaction</u> and consumption of these brands will be affected? How?	a. Can you give me an example of how it may (not) affect you? b. Have you ever boycotted or bought a product because of a brand association or image related to an issue? Why? c. If you agree (disagree) with a brand's position on an issue, do you share it with others and discuss it? If you do not, why not? d. Would you recommend this brand to others?	- Participants' behavioural intention.

### Real brand activism scenarios presentation

Scenario-based questions	7. What is your general impression of this stance?	a. Why do you think that? b. How does this position affect your view of the brand?	- Participants' perceptions.
	8. What emotions did you feel?	a. What makes you feel that way?	- Participants' emotion.

		b. What are your emotions toward the brand itself?	
	9. What do you do in response to the brand's stance?	c. What is the reason for your response or lack thereof? d. Do you think that the brand's engagement/involvement in this issue will affect how you use its products or services? Can you give an example	- Participants' behavioural intention.
	10. To what extent do you trust this support?	a. Can you describe what would make a brand stance realistic for you? b. What factors do you consider when determining a company's genuine motives? c. To what extent do you agree with this sentence? Why?  "Typically, people do not trust brands that take a stand on these controversial issues."	- Brand activism authenticity
	11. What are the factors that influence your opinion on this issue?	a. Would your <u>religion/culture</u> impact your view on this issue? Can you explain answer? b. What about your <u>feelings</u> ? Do you think your religion impacts how you feel? c. What about your reaction? Would your religion influence how you respond? How?	- If not previously mentioned, I expect religious/culture values to be mentioned here.
	12. Do you believe your response is affected by whether a brand is local or global? Can you explain your answer?	a. How would you <u>feel</u> since the brand is global? (local)? Why? b. Would the stance taken by the brand impact your decision to continue <u>using</u> its products? Can you explain that?	- If not previously mentioned, I will bring this up.  - Globalness/localness
Conclusion	13. After all this discussion, what is the most significant factor when you evaluate a brand's stance on a particular issue? And why?	a. How do you evaluate a brand stance? b. What are the most important factors? c. Will these factors be the primary consideration for your (purchase, recommendation and so on)? Or will the quality of their product and service be the main factor? Why?	- Participant's reflection

## Appendix H: Interview Transcripts Management and Analysis via NVivo

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface, specifically the 'Coding' view. The left sidebar shows a hierarchical tree of project items, including 'Culture', 'Methodology', 'CODES', 'CASES', 'NOTES', and 'SEARCH'. The 'CODES' section is expanded, showing 'Nodes' and 'Interview' sub-sections. The 'Interview' section is selected and expanded, showing 'Literature review' and 'Methodology' sub-sections. The main workspace shows a list of codes under the 'Global' node, with 'Attribution theory' and 'Coping Theory' expanded. The 'Coping Theory' code is selected. Below the code list, three transcript snippets are displayed:

- File:\Interviews\Interview 15 - Transcript**  
1 reference coded, 2.53% coverage  
Reference 1: 2.53% coverage  
00:22:47 Speaker 2  
Maybe, yeah, maybe.  
00:22:50 Speaker 1  
Okay, so this perspective, it doesn't really affect your behavior or consumption of Nike?  
00:22:59 Speaker 2  
Mostly no. But I don't think I'll buy from it. Currently, I don't feel the same feeling I felt a while ago with Huda Beauty. Because for example, there are specific things that I am planning to buy from Huda Beauty, but after I found out, okay, there are alternatives, why should I buy from them? The feeling I had with Huda Beauty is not the same feeling I have with Nike now.
- File:\Interviews\Interview 17 - Transcript**  
2 references coded, 6.87% coverage  
Reference 1: 4.90% coverage  
00:25:51 Speaker 2  
At least look at this, I can accept this from Nike.  
00:25:55 Speaker 1  
Why?  
00:25:56 Speaker 2  
Because this is designed by Nike, wait a minute.  
Because it stems from a philosophy, the liberal philosophy, from the founder of Nike, you can't tell me that he is Arab or Muslim, right?  
00:26:15 Speaker 1

## Appendix I: Interview Questionnaire Sampling (a translated version)

### Research Title:

The Impact of Brand Engagement in Controversial Issues on Saudi Consumers' Interaction with the Brand, Their Personal Identification with the Brand, and Their Intention to Use the Brand

### Principal Researcher:

Abdulrahman Almuajel

This research project is being conducted as part of a doctoral degree at Cardiff University. It aims to explore Saudi consumers' perceptions of brands that engage with controversial issues (for example, LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality). The findings of this project are expected to contribute to a better understanding of how Saudi consumers view and interact with brands involved in such issues.

You can find more details about the research through this link: [Research Information](#)

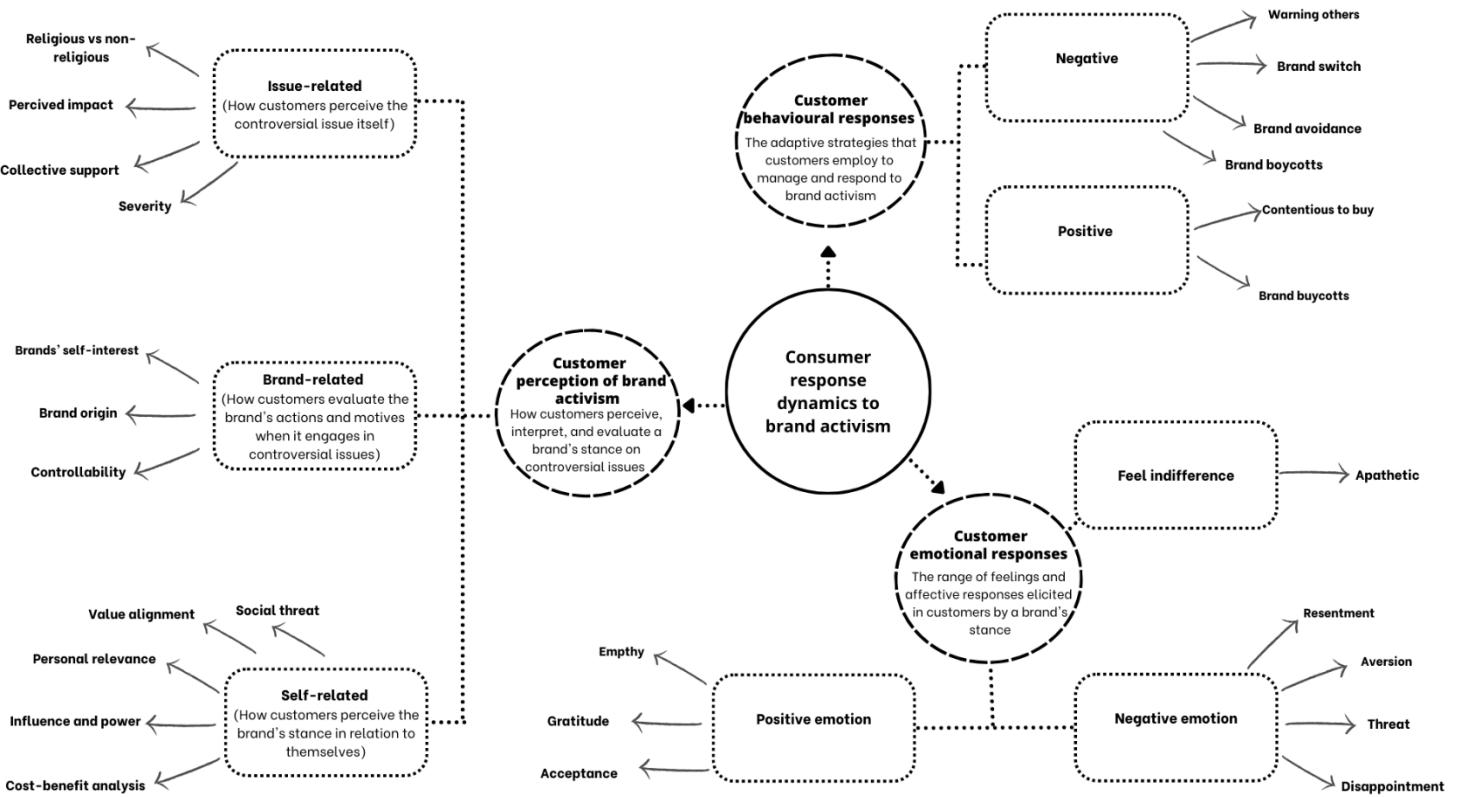
- *Please select all the brands you are familiar with:*  
Flyadeal, Starbucks, Huda Beauty, Sephora, beIN SPORTS, PepsiCo, WhatsApp, Nike, Harvey Nichols, McDonald's, Adidas, Puma
- *Please select all the brands you have previously consumed:*  
Flyadeal, Starbucks, Huda Beauty, Sephora, beIN SPORTS, PepsiCo, WhatsApp, Nike, Harvey Nichols, McDonald's, Adidas, Puma
- *Do you feel that you can associate your personal image or identity with any particular brand? (Select all that apply):*  
Flyadeal, Starbucks, Huda Beauty, Sephora, beIN SPORTS, PepsiCo, WhatsApp, Nike, Harvey Nichols, McDonald's, Adidas, Puma, None
- *How would you rate yourself in terms of following football?*  
(0 = Not at all a follower, 10 = Very strong follower)
- *Have you ever seen a brand take a position (whether in support of or against) on a controversial issue—for example, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, or other causes?*  
Yes / No
- *Have you ever interacted with a brand because it took a stance on a controversial issue (e.g., gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, the Palestinian cause, or others)? This interaction—positive or negative—could include liking, sharing, retweeting, commenting, or even offline conversations with friends or colleagues.*  
Yes / No
- *Could you briefly explain how you interacted with this brand, and what the issue was?*
- *What is your age?*
- *Educational level:*  
Less than secondary / Secondary (or equivalent) / Undergraduate (or equivalent) / Master's (or equivalent) / Doctorate (or equivalent)
- *What is your gender?*  
Male / Female
- *Have you ever lived outside Saudi Arabia?*  
Yes / No

I agree to share my personal information regarding age and education level for the purposes explained to me. I understand that this information will be handled in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation and treated with complete confidentiality, unless disclosure is required by law or professional duty.

- Yes, I agree to participate in this research project
- No, I do not agree to participate in this research project

**Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. Please provide a contact method, such as your WhatsApp number or email address, so that we can arrange an interview.**

## Appendix J: An Example of an Initial Thematic Map



## Appendix K: Pre-test 1

### Figure A: Issue perceived as controversial

#### Controversiality

Q61

Controversial issues are those that cause a difference in opinions due to differences in perspectives, values, or traditions.

To what extent do you think these issues are considered controversial? (1 = Extremely uncontroversial, 7 = Extremely controversial).

	Extremely uncontroversial	Moderately uncontroversial	Slightly uncontroversial	Neither controversial nor uncontroversial	Slightly controversial	Moderately controversial	Extremely controversial
Environmental conservation and sustainable development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Women's rights and roles in the society	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
LGBTQ+ rights	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freedom of speech	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religious freedom (the right for a person to follow any religion)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The death penalty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Immigrant rights	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Racism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Palestine conflict	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organising and hosting musical events and public concerts in Saudi Arabia	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Figure B: Value incongruence with Saudi traditions

#### Saudi traditions conflicts

Q2

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Supporting homosexuality aligns with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Women participating in public football matches aligns with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Men and women working together in mixed-gender workplaces align with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Women going out in public without wearing the hijab aligns with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Women driving car aligns with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hosting public musical events and concerts aligns with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Women joining the workforce aligns with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Donations to orphans align with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supporting migrant workers' rights aligns with Saudi tradition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Saudi women participating in public sports, such as swimming, boxing, and running conflicts with Saudi traditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix L: Pre-test 2 (Study 2 & Study 3)

The objective of this pre-test was to assess the effectiveness of the severity manipulation in IBA, distinguishing between Mild and Severe conditions. After the exposure to the stimulus materials, participants responded to the following manipulation check: “How would you describe the severity of the brand’s tweet in relation to Saudi traditions?” Responses were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = Very mild, 4 = Average, 7 = Very severe) (Davvetas et al. 2024).

### Issue 1: Saudi women’s participation in public sports (Study 2)

**Figure A: Severe Condition – Gender Equality**

English/Illustration Version

Arabic/Original Version



At FitFlex, we believe that Saudi women’s participation in public sports of all kinds should be encouraged despite the traditional and cultural values associated with them as women in Saudi Arabia.

This issue is about inclusivity and equality for all, regardless of gender. Saudi women have suffered for far too long due to these cultural values and inequality.

#WomenInSports #Empowerment #2030 رؤية\_السعودية\_2030



2:42 PM · Nov 7, 2024

70 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 14K Likes



في FitFlex، نؤمن بأن مشاركة المرأة السعودية في الرياضات العامة بمختلف أنواعها يجب تشجيعها بدون مراعاة للقيم التقليدية والثقافية المرتبطة بها كأنتى في السعودية.

هذه المسألة تتعلق بالشمولية والمساواة للجميع بغض النظر عن جنسهم. لقد عانت المرأة السعودية لفترة طويلة جدًا بسبب هذه القيم الثقافية وعدم المساواة.

2030 #WomenInSports #Empowerment# #رؤية\_السعودية\_2030



2:42 PM · Nov 7, 2024

70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes

**Figure B:** Mild Condition – Gender Equality

English/Illustration Version



At FitFlex, we believe that Saudi women's participation in public sports of all kinds should be encouraged while also respecting the traditional and cultural values associated with them as women in Saudi Arabia

This issue is about empowerment and cultural respect. We recognize that equal opportunities are important, but we also acknowledge that Saudi women have been respected for far so long due to these cultural values.

#WomenInSports #Empowerment #2030 رؤية\_السعودية\_2030



2:42 PM · Nov 7, 2024

70 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 14K Likes



Arabic/Original Version



في فيقليلس، نؤمن بأن مشاركة المرأة السعودية في الرياضات العامة بمختلف أنواعها يجب تشجيعه مع أيضا احترام القيم التقليدية والثقافية المرتبطة بها كأثني في السعودية.

هذه المسألة تتعلق بالتمكين والاحترام الثقافي. نحن ندرك أن تكافؤ الفرص أمر مهم، لكننا نعرف بأن المرأة السعودية قد حظيت بتقدير لفترة طويلة بفضل الاحترام لهذه القيم الثقافية.

2030 #WomenInSports #Empowerment# رؤية\_السعودية\_2030



2:42 PM · Nov 7, 2024

70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes

## Issue 2: Saudi Arabia's hosting of music festivals (Study 3)

Figure A: Severe Condition – Hosting of Music Festivals

English/Illustration Version



At FitFlex, we believe that supporting music and public concerts in Saudi Arabia should be done despite the traditional and cultural values of the community.

This is about inclusivity and openness to global arts. Music and arts enthusiasts in Saudi Arabia have suffered for too long due to cultural restrictions and unequal access to these activities.

#SaudiArabia #رؤية\_السعودية\_2030 #موسم\_الرياض

2:42 PM · Nov 6, 2024

70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes

Arabic/Original Version



في فيتفلكس، نؤمن بأن دعم الموسيقى والحفلات العامة في السعودية يجب أن يتم بدون مراعاة للقيم التقليدية والثقافية المرتبطة بالمجتمع.

هذه المسألة تتعلق بالشمولية والافتتاح على الفنون العالمية. لقد عانى عشاق الموسيقى والفنون في السعودية لفترة طويلة جدًا بسبب القيود الثقافية وعدم المساواة في الوصول إلى هذه الأنشطة.

#رؤية\_السعودية\_2030 #SaudiArabia #موسم\_الرياض

2:42 PM · Nov 6, 2024

70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes

Figure B: Mild Condition – Hosting of Music Festivals

English/Illustration Version



At FitFlex, we believe that supporting music and public concerts in Saudi Arabia should be done while respecting the traditional and cultural values of the community.

This is about honouring Saudi culture while embracing musical diversity. We believe in the importance of promoting the arts but also believe in the importance of presenting these activities in ways that align with Saudi Arabia's deeply rooted cultural values.

#SaudiArabia #رؤية\_السعودية\_2030 #موسم\_الرياض

2:42 PM · Nov 6, 2024

70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes

Arabic/Original Version



في فيتفلكس، نؤمن بأن دعم الموسيقى والحفلات العامة في السعودية يجب أن يتم مع احترام القيم التقليدية والثقافية المرتبطة بالمجتمع.

هذه المسألة تتعلق بالاحتفاء بالثقافة السعودية مع مراعاة التنوع الموسيقي. نحن نؤمن بأهمية تعزيز الفنون ولكن نؤمن بأهمية تقديم هذه الأنشطة بطرق تتماشى مع القيم الثقافية الراسخة في السعودية.

#رؤية\_السعودية\_2030 #SaudiArabia #موسم\_الرياض

2:42 PM · Nov 6, 2024

70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes

## Appendix M: Pre-test 3 (Study 4)

### Mild IBA and Domestic Brand Origin Manipulation Check

FitFlex is a well-known SAUDI sports brand launched by a SAUDI businessman, known for designing high-quality athletic gear and apparel. The brand's products are widely available in the Saudi market and Middle East in general.

Here is some additional information on the brand:

Company Headquarters: Riyadh, KSA

Founded in: Jeddah, KSA

Name of the Founder: Yazeed Al-Fada

FitFlex is also known for supporting human rights and has voiced its opinions on different controversial issues, especially issues related to gender equality. The brand recently tweeted to clarify its stance regarding Saudi women's rights for equal opportunities to participate in public sports, such as football, swimming, boxing, running etc.



At FitFlex, we believe that Saudi women's participation in public sports of all kinds should be encouraged while also respecting the traditional and cultural values associated with them as women in Saudi Arabia

This issue is about empowerment and cultural respect. We recognize that equal opportunities are important, but we also acknowledge that Saudi women have been respected for far so long due to these cultural values.

#WomenInSports #Empowerment #2030 رؤية السعودية 2030



2:42 PM · Nov 7, 2024

70 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 14K Likes



Participants were then asked the following questions:

Q80



**What did FitFlex state in the previous tweet?**

- Saudi women's participation in public sports should be encouraged despite traditional Saudi values.
- Saudi women's participation in public sports should be encouraged while respecting traditional Saudi values.
- I do not know

----- Page Break -----

Q79



**Please answer the following questions:**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
FitFlex is a domestic brand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The country FitFlex originated from is Saudi Arabia	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## **Severe IBA and Foreign Brand Origin Manipulation Check**

FitFlex is a well-known AMERICAN sports brand launched by an AMERICAN businessman, known for designing high-quality athletic gear and apparel. The brand's products are widely available in the Saudi market and Middle East in general.

Here is some additional information on the brand:

Company Headquarters: New York, US  
Founded in: San Francisco, US  
Name of the Founder: Brando Powell

FitFlex is also known for supporting human rights and has voiced its opinions on different controversial issues, especially issues related to gender equality. The brand recently tweeted to clarify its stance regarding Saudi women's rights for equal opportunities to participate in public sports, such as football, swimming, boxing, running etc.



At FitFlex, we believe that Saudi women's participation in public sports of all kinds should be encouraged despite the traditional and cultural values associated with them as women in Saudi Arabia.

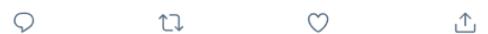
This issue is about inclusivity and equality for all, regardless of gender. Saudi women have suffered for far too long due to these cultural values and inequality.

#WomenInSports #Empowerment #2030 رؤية\_السعودية\_2030



2:42 PM · Nov 7, 2024

70 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 14K Likes



Participants were then asked the following questions:

Q80

**What did FitFlex state in the previous tweet?**

- Saudi women's participation in public sports should be encouraged despite traditional Saudi values.
- Saudi women's participation in public sports should be encouraged while respecting traditional Saudi values.
- I do not know



Page Break

Brand origin (USA)

Please answer the following questions:

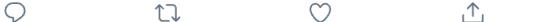
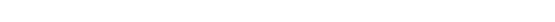
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
FitFlex is a foreign brand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The country FitFlex originated from is America	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix N: Study 1 (Experiment Manipulation)

**Figure A:** Congruence with Saudi Tradition Condition – LGBTQ+ Rights

English/Illustration Version	Arabic/Original Version
<p>FitFlex  @FitFlex</p> <p>At FitFlex, we believe that LGBTQ+ rights should not be supported as it misaligns with Saudi traditional societal values.</p> <p>This is about preserving cultural and moral traditions while respecting all individuals. Saudis have been honourably respected for far so long due to their appreciation of cultural values.</p> <p>#LoveIsLove #Pride #Saudi_Arabia #LGBTQRights</p> <p>2:42 PM · Jun 1, 2024</p> <p>70 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 14K Likes</p> 	<p>FitFlex  @FitFlex</p> <p>في فيتفليكس، نؤمن بعدم ضرورة دعم حقوق مجتمع الميم (LGBTQ+) في السعودية لأنها لا تتماشى مع القيم الاجتماعية والتقاليد في السعودية.</p> <p>هذه المسألة تتعلق بالاحفاظ على التقاليد الثقافية والأخلاقية مع احترام جميع الأفراد. لقد حظي السعوديون بالتقدير لفترة طويلة بفضل هذا الاحترام لقيمهم الثقافية.</p> <p>LoveIsLove #Pride #SaudiArabia #LGBTQRights#</p> <p>2:42 PM · Jun 1, 2024</p> <p>70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes</p> 

**Figure B:** Incongruence with Saudi Tradition Condition – LGBTQ+ Rights

English/Illustration Version	Arabic/Original Version
<p>FitFlex  @FitFlex</p> <p>At FitFlex, we believe that LGBTQ+ rights should be supported despite Saudi traditional societal values.</p> <p>This is about inclusivity and equality for all, regardless of sexual orientation. LGBTQ+ people have been badly affected for far too long due to these restrictions and mistreatment.</p> <p>#LoveIsLove #Pride #Saudi_Arabia #LGBTQRights</p> <p>2:42 PM · Jun 1, 2024</p> <p>70 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 14K Likes</p> 	<p>FitFlex  @FitFlex</p> <p>في فيتفليكس، نؤمن بضرورة دعم حقوق مجتمع الميم (LGBTQ+) في السعودية بدون مراعاة لقيم الاجتماعية والتقاليد في السعودية.</p> <p>هذه المسألة تتعلق بالشمولية والمساواة للجميع بغض النظر عن ميولهم الجنسية. لقد عانى أفراد مجتمع الميم لفترة طويلة جدًا بسبب هذه القيد وسوء المعاملة.</p> <p>LoveIsLove #Pride #SaudiArabia #LGBTQRights#</p> <p>2:42 PM · Jun 1, 2024</p> <p>70 Retweets 10 Quote Tweets 1.4K Likes</p> 

## Appendix O: Mediation Analysis with Covariate Variables

**Table A:** Mediation Analysis Results with The Control of Gender, Age, Education Level, Issue Involvement, and CBA (Study 1; H2)

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)
BA → RVI	2.04	.33	6.22	< .001	(1.39, 2.70)
RVI → Purchase Intention	-0.51	.07	-6.74	< .001	(-0.66, -0.36)
BA → Purchase Intention (Total Effect)	-2.01	.31	-6.50	< .001	(-2.62, -1.39)
BA → Purchase Intention (Direct Effect)	-0.96	.30	-3.17	.0019	(-1.56, -0.36)
Indirect Effect (BA → RVI → Purchase Intention)	-1.04	.24	-	-	(-1.60, -0.62)

**Table B:** RVI and ROD Serial Mediation Analysis Results with The Control of Gender, Age, Education Level, Issue Involvement, and CBA (Study 3; H5a); PROCESS Model 6

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.77	0.24	-3.12	0.0022	(-1.25, -0.28)
IBA → RVI	1.29	0.24	5.27	< .001	(0.81, 1.78)
IBA → ROD	0.36	0.22	1.60	0.1102	(-0.08, 0.81)
RVI → PI	-0.34	0.08	-3.92	< .001	(-0.51, -0.17)
RVI → ROD	0.38	0.07	5.16	< .001	(0.23, 0.53)
ROD → PI	-0.38	0.09	-4.01	< .001	(-0.57, -0.19)
Indirect Effect (IBA → RVI → ROD → PI)	-0.19	0.08	-	-	(-0.38, -0.07)

**Table C:** SIT and ROD Serial Mediation Analysis Results with The Control of Gender, Age, Education Level, Issue Involvement, and CBA (Study 3; H5b); PROCESS Model 6

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.84	0.24	-3.42	0.0008	(-1.32, -0.35)
IBA → SIT	1.45	0.28	5.03	< .001	(0.88, 2.02)
IBA → ROD	0.20	0.20	1.00	0.3175	(-0.19, 0.60)
SIT → PI	-0.29	0.08	-3.48	0.0007	(-0.46, -0.12)
SIT → ROD	0.45	0.05	8.00	< .001	(0.34, 0.56)
ROD → PI	-0.32	0.10	-2.98	0.0034	(-0.53, -0.10)
Indirect Effect (IBA → SIT → ROD → PI)	-0.21	0.10	-	-	(-0.45, -0.56)

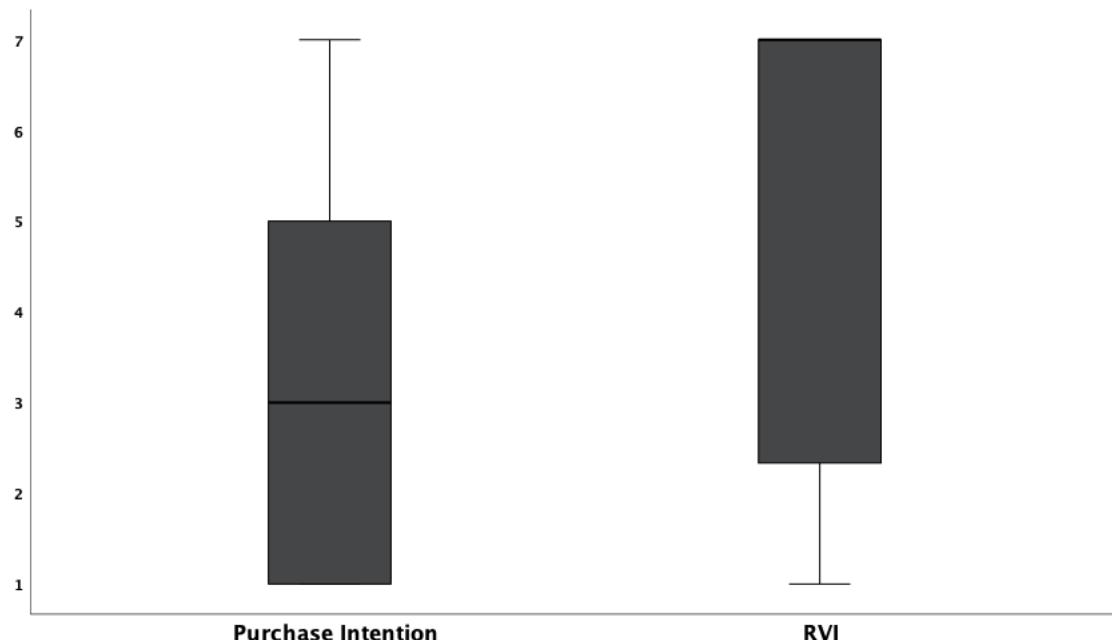
**Table D:** Self-dignity and Forgiveness Serial Mediation Analysis Results with The Control of Gender, Age, Education Level, Issue Involvement, and CBA (Study 3; H6); PROCESS Model 6

Path	b	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
IBA → PI (Direct Effect)	-0.20	0.23	-0.88	0.3774	(-0.66, 0.25)
IBA → Self-Dignity	-1.64	0.22	-7.43	< .001	(-2.08, -1.20)

IBA → Forgiveness coping	-0.40	0.23	-1.75	0.0815	(-0.87, -0.05)
Self-Dignity → PI	0.36	0.09	3.80	0.0002	(0.17, 0.55)
Self-Dignity → Forgiveness coping	0.65	0.07	8.32	< .001	(0.49, 0.80)
Forgiveness coping → PI	0.50	0.08	5.74	< .001	(0.33, 0.67)
Indirect Effect (IBA → SD → FC → PI)	-0.54	0.16	-	-	(-0.90, -025)

## Appendix P: Descriptive statistics, normality tests, and outlier checks (Study 1)

**Figure A:** A Boxplot Graphic of Purchase Intention and RVI (Study 1)



Notes: RVI= Religious value-incongruence.

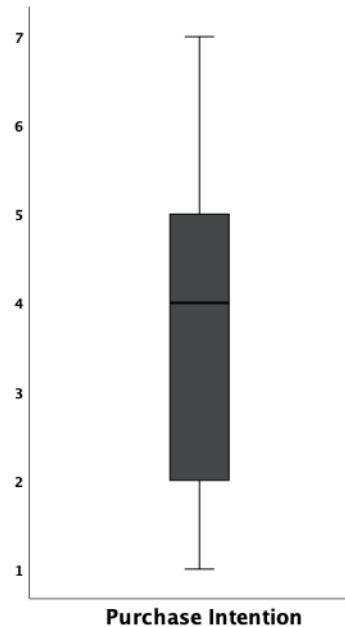
**Table A:** Descriptive Statistics and Normality Assessment (Study 1)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Skewness	Kurtosis
RFI	132	1.00	7.00	4.97	2.44	-0.588	-1.407
Purchase Intention				3.17	2.16	0.387	-1.328

Notes: RVI= Religious value-incongruence.

## Appendix Q: Descriptive statistics, normality tests, and outlier checks (Study 2)

**Figure A:** A Boxplot Graphic of Purchase Intention Study 2

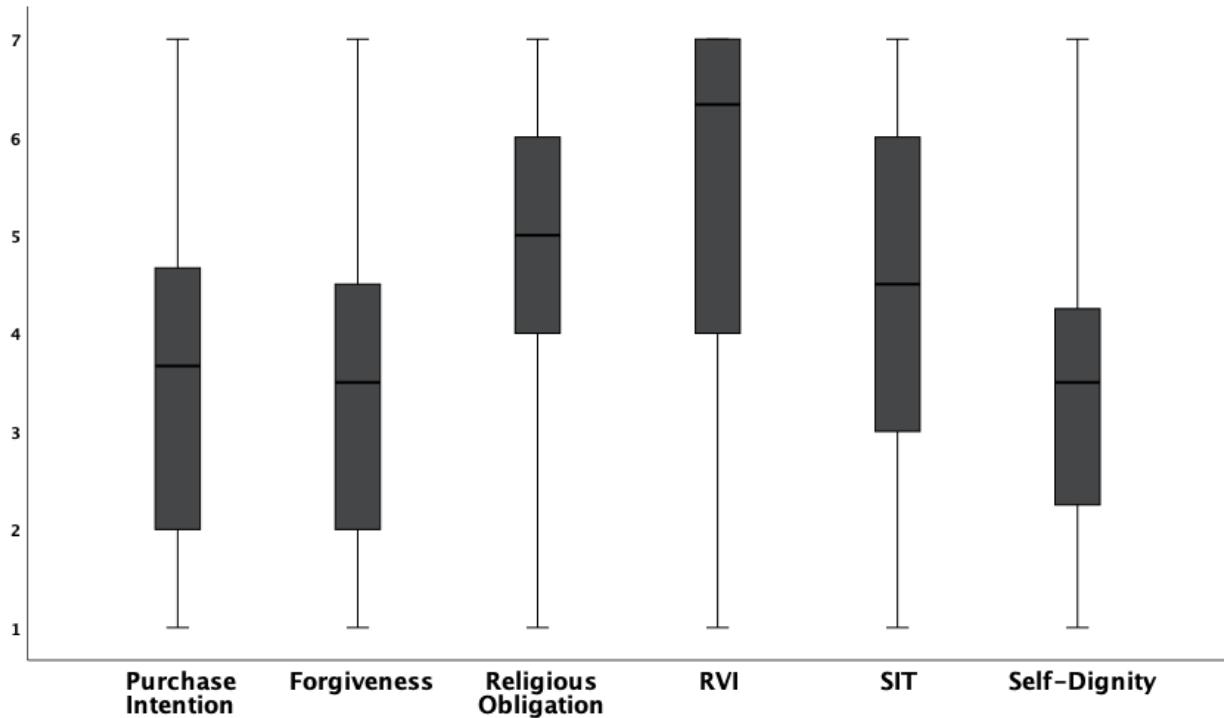


**Table A:** Descriptive Statistics and Normality Assessment (Study 2)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Median	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error	Highest Z-Score	Lowest Z-Score
Purchase Intention	164	1.00	7.00	3.68	1.77	4.00	-0.13	0.19	-1.08	0.37	1.86	-1.50

## Appendix R: Descriptive statistics, normality tests, and outlier checks (Study 3)

**Figure A:** A Boxplot Graphic of Study 3 Main Variables



Notes: **RVI**= Religious value-incongruence. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat.

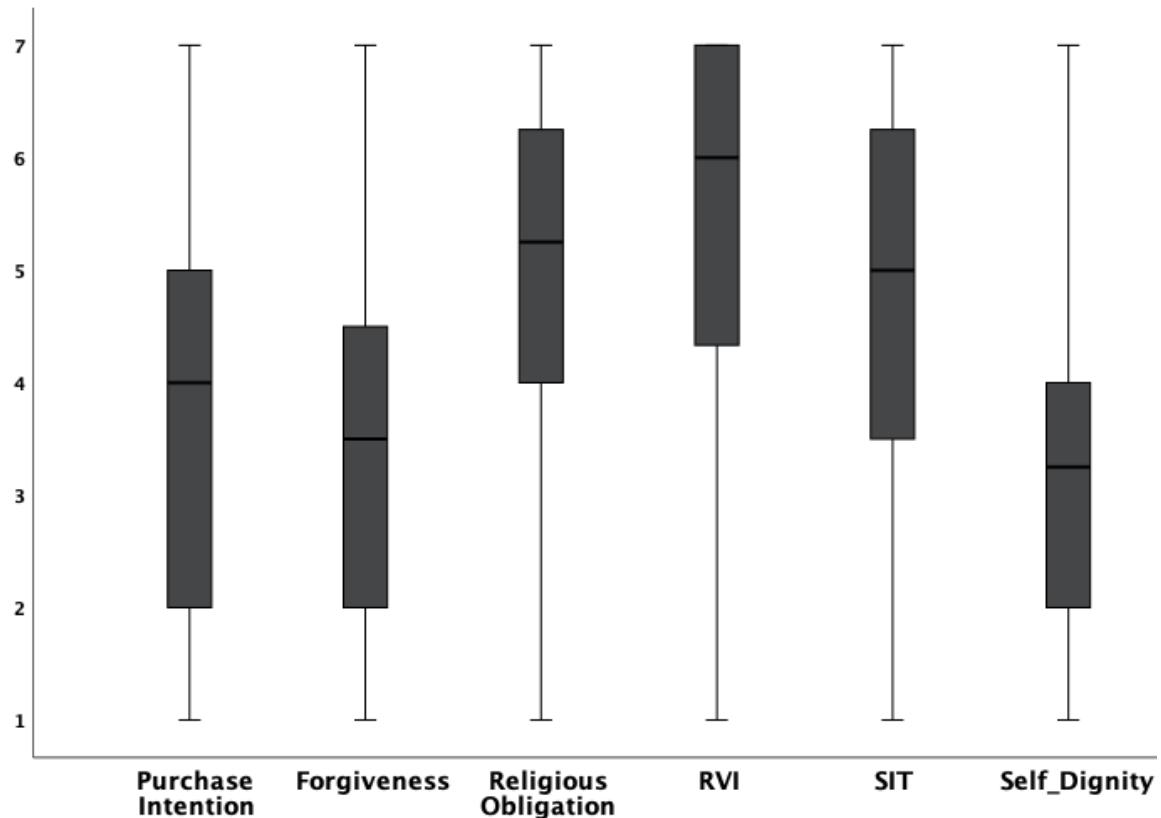
**Table A:** Descriptive Statistics and Normality Assessment (Study 3)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Median	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error	Highest Z-Score	Lowest Z-Score
Purchase Intention	145	1.00	7.00	3.38	1.71	3.50	0.18	0.20	-0.90	0.40	2.11	-1.38
Forgiveness				3.43	1.61	3.50	0.22		-0.75		2.22	-1.50
ROD coping				4.92	1.39	5.00	-0.51		-0.05		1.49	-2.82
SIT				4.38	1.88	4.50	-0.30		-0.90		1.39	-1.79
Self-Dignity				3.47	1.67	3.50	0.31		-0.63		2.11	-1.47
RVI				5.42	1.82	5.50	-0.89		-0.45		0.86	-2.42

Notes: **RVI**= Religious value-incongruence. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat.

## Appendix S: Descriptive statistics, normality tests, and outlier checks (Study 4)

**Figure A:** A Boxplot Graphic of Study 4 Main Variables



Notes: **RV1**= Religious value-incongruence. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat.

**Table A:** Descriptive Statistics and Normality Assessment (Study 4)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error	Highest Z-Score	Lowest Z-Score
Purchase Intention	193	1.00	7.00	3.5803	1.69678	-0.133	0.175	-1.108	0.348	2.01	-1.52
Forgiveness				3.4482	1.68747	0.264		-0.900		0.87	-2.91
RV1				5.6149	1.58065	-1.017		0.190		1.32	-2.71
ROD				5.0350	1.48487	-0.526		-0.231		2.10	-1.45
SIT				4.7189	1.88323	-0.466		-0.872		1.21	-1.97
Self-Dignity				3.1244	1.51815	0.237		-0.583		2.55	-1.39

Notes: **RV1**= Religious value-incongruence. **ROD**= Religious obligation driven. **SIT**= Social identity threat.