

Does fortune favor the brave? Brand bravery's impact on green- and inclusive marketing

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ABSTRACT

The study provides new insights by investigating the influence of brand bravery on marketing communication effectiveness in two bravery contexts: environmental sustainability and inclusivity communications, in an emerging market, South Africa. Structural equation modeling tested the conceptual models based on 364 and 471 responses. Brand bravery significantly influenced brand- and advertisement attitudes in the sustainability context, but only advertisement attitudes in the inclusivity context. Interestingly, lower consumer-brand identification had a stronger moderation effect than higher values. This was true for the relationship between bravery and brand attitude for both contexts; yet, only for sustainability communication did the same occur for the relationship between bravery and advertisement attitude. The main contributions are insights into how consumers see a brand's bravery from green marketing and inclusivity perspectives and the effectiveness of these communications from an understudied geographical viewpoint. It also highlights the moderating role of consumer-brand identification in the consumer-brand relational framework.

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Introduction

Brands operate in a constantly evolving landscape that necessitates that they respond to the changing needs of consumers, take a stance on controversial issues, and be resilient to social pressure, all while upholding their core values – signifying brand bravery (Jain et al. 2021). This relatively new concept of brand bravery consists of altruistic, bold, courageous, determined, enduring, and fearless dimensions (Jain et al. 2021). Jain et al. (2021) recommended exploring bravery in various cultural samples to assess its cross-cultural validity. In addition, exploring brand bravery is essential, given that it allows brands to differentiate themselves and challenge societal norms proactively rather than reactively (Abdulkarim 2018). However, portraying a brand as brave is not without potential risk and legislative backlash (Clements 2017; Kuchinka

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et al. 2018; Kwon et al. 2024; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). Portraying a brand as brave could elicit negative consequences, such as negative WOM on social media, the spread of misinformation, and even consumer boycotts (Murray 2023; Woolworths Holdings Ltd 2023). As a result, research on brand bravery provides valuable insights into how consumers react to brands that take a stance and assists brands in taking meaningful actions that will resonate with their target market while minimizing risks and maximizing positive outcomes.

Our paper aims to provide new insights into brand bravery by investigating the influence of brand bravery on marketing communication effectiveness (brand attitude, ad attitude, and subsequent purchase intent) in two bravery contexts for a prominent South African retail brand, Woolworths. The first could be viewed as a more subtle type of bravery, environmental sustainability advertising (altruistic), and the other, an example of a more controversial dimension of bravery, inclusivity marketing communication (determined). However, regardless of the 'degree of bravery', given that both are dimensions of brand bravery, we wanted to determine if similar results are obtained, thus confirming the overarching construct of brand bravery proposed by Jain et al. (2021). We also investigate the moderating role of consumer-brand identity and the mediating role of ad attitudes.

As a strategy, brand bravery is a brand's general approach to marketing, showcasing their willingness to be bold, creative, and take risks to differentiate themselves and to enhance the brand (Azizi et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2024), and is implemented through a series of tactics. For example, running controversial advertising campaigns, launching innovative products, or taking a stance on social or political issues. Our paper investigates brand bravery from a tactical brand perspective – thus, the specific actions that a brand takes to achieve its branding goal (Abdelkader 2024). As marketing communication campaigns are easily identifiable and connect with consumers emotionally, our investigation will extend beyond the tactical to include consumer-brand identity. Consumers identify with brands, often based on the communication or advertising portrayed by the brand. Consumer-brand identification results from the brand showcasing similar values as the consumer (Jain et al. 2021), such as being environmentally sustainable or inclusive.

Research shows that brands that are perceived to be environmentally conscious (Dang-Van et al. 2023), inclusive (Addie, Ball, and Adams 2020), or brave (Jain et al. 2021) favorably relate with consumer-brand identity. Given that consumer-brand identity favorably interacts with brands (Berrozpe, Campo, and Yagüe 2019) and the gap in research investigating the effect of environmental sustainability and inclusivity as brand bravery (Abdelkader 2024; Jain et al. 2021), this paper explores consumer-brand identity as a potential moderator in the relationships between brand bravery and attitudes (towards brand and ad) as indicators of advertising effectiveness.

Exploring brand bravery is especially important given that taking risks and designing a campaign that stands out from the competition differentiates great marketers and campaigns, highlighting the need for bravery in marketing communications (Abdulkarim 2018). Abdelkader (2024) suggests that further research is needed on brand bravery, particularly investigating the consequences of brand bravery and the impact of bravery on consumers' attitudes and behavior. Further, Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen (2017)

showed that it is beneficial for brands to challenge societal norms proactively rather than reactively.

Advertising effectiveness is an important area of study; however, there is limited research on it from an African view, as most advertising effectiveness studies are performed in Western countries (Reynolds and Phillips 2019; Sahin, Baloglu, and Topcuoglu 2020). Krstić, Kostić-Stanković, and Cvijović (2021) assert that it is essential to investigate people's responses to environmental sustainability advertising and its effectiveness. In addition, while inclusive advertising is often considered in a positive light, with increased representation, the risk of social and legislative backlash and being accused of rainbow washing is pertinent (Clements 2017), emphasizing the need to understand the impact of these campaigns on brand attitude, ad attitude and purchase intent (advertising effectiveness). Literature has yet to examine the interrelationships between brand bravery and advertising effectiveness from the viewpoints of environmental sustainability and inclusivity marketing communications. In addition, we explore ad attitude as a potential mediator in the relationship between brand bravery and brand attitude as research highlights the mediating role of ad attitude (Ganesan, Sridhar, and Priyadharsani 2016), especially in advertising effectiveness (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986).

Our paper makes several contributions. First, it provides a novel perspective on the under-researched construct of brand bravery and advertising effectiveness by exploring two bravery types: a brand being *altruistic* by using environmentally friendly ads and being *determined* with its LGBTQ+ inclusivity marketing campaign. Second, it tests two dimensions of the relatively new and untested brand bravery scale. Third, it sheds light on the effectiveness of environmental sustainability and inclusive advertising from a bravery perspective. Fourth, it provides empirical and theoretical evidence of interrelationships between globally relevant consumer-brand relational constructs from a geographically understudied perspective (i.e. South Africa). Fifth, it emphasizes the importance of consumer-brand identification as a moderator in a bravery context.

The remainder of the paper includes a literature review, hypotheses development, materials and methods, results, implications, limitations, and future research opportunities.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Social identity theory (SIT) is used as a lens to explore perceptions of a brand demonstrating brand bravery (*via* environmental sustainability advertising or inclusivity communications) on perceived advertising effectiveness. SIT has been used successfully as the theoretical underpinning in marketing (Banerjee and Sreejesh 2024; Nugraha et al. 2023) and advertising effectiveness (Shao et al. 2023) research.

SIT proposes that consumers' identities play an essential part when assessing a brand or brand communication as 'is me' or 'not me' (Lam et al. 2010). Given that social identity includes the various roles that a consumer plays, and they are organized in a hierarchy based on their salience (Stryker and Burke 2000), a specific identity could thus be triggered in a particular context (Chattaraman, Lennon, and Rudd 2010),

for example by cues (e.g. environmental sustainability or inclusivity) in an advertisement (Shao et al. 2023).

Social identity theory highlights how brands can symbolize consumers' social and self-identities (Lam, Ahearne, and Schillewaert 2012). Consumers tend to support brands associated with their social identity, as it reinforces a positive self-image and fosters a sense of belonging. Jain et al. (2021) link SIT to brand bravery by proposing that consumers choose brands that reflect their identities – thus, a brave brand may reflect an aspect of the consumer's identity. Given that brand bravery includes a brand's inclination to take a stance on contentious topics, it aims to align the brand with customers who share the same values and beliefs; here, being environmentally sustainable or inclusive. The brand can reinforce its relevance and credibility by supporting social issues that resonate with a particular group.

We expect brand bravery to influence advertising effectiveness because consumers would be inclined to support brands that represent their values and with which they identify and view such brands favorably. Furthermore, consumer-brand identity links to the key tenets of SIT, as consumer-brand identity denotes the mental and affective connection between the brand's image and the consumer's self-image (Park et al. 2010). We, thus, expect that the more congruent the consumer-brand identity, the stronger the relationship between bravery and attitudes (brand and advertisement).

Brand bravery

A brand is considered brave when it faces challenges, acts philanthropically and boldly, and stands by its values for social (e.g. inclusivity), political, or ecological (e.g. sustainability) causes (Lee et al. 2024). Thus, brand bravery is defined as being perceived as altruistic, bold, courageous, determined, enduring, fearless, or gritty (Jain et al. 2021; Azizi et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2024).

Altruism is behaving beneficially for society (Tan, Abd Aziz, and Ngah 2020). According to Lähdesmäki and Takala (2012), acting for the greater good should be viewed as a moral duty; however, this requires bravery, as it puts the consumer's well-being above profit-making. Being *bold* requires rebellious marketing techniques and non-conformity to industry norms (Jain et al. 2021). Brands are often in situations that require them to demonstrate *courage* (Jain et al. 2021). When a brand has the drive to represent its core values and take a stand on controversial issues through its marketing actions, it is *determined* (Jain et al. 2021). For a brand to be *enduring*, it must endure hardships and show resilience (Martínez-Martí and Ruch 2017) as an act of bravery to sustain its reputation. *Fearless* brands are innovative and unconventional, and being *gritty* focuses on brands that have confidently confessed their shortcomings and mistakes (Jain et al. 2021).

Promoting a brand as environmentally sustainable reflects the *altruism* dimension of bravery, as altruism refers to a brand that considers the 'greater good of different stakeholders, environment, and society at large and displays socially responsible conduct' (Jain et al. 2021, 1216). Retailers (such as the South African retail giants SPAR, Pick n Pay, and Woolworths) are increasingly required to reduce the environmental impacts of their operations. However, promoting brands as environmentally sustainable may be risky considering that not all consumers consider sustainability

important (Kuchinka et al. 2018), concerns about greenwashing (Kwon et al. 2024), or they prefer less sustainable products due to lower prices.

Inclusive marketing communications demonstrate a brand's bravery by showing its determination. *Determined* refers to a brand that takes a stance for what it believes in as related to its core values and communicates its stance on controversial issues (Jain et al. 2021). Woolworths's commitment to care for the environment, people, and communities acknowledges that some groups in society are marginalized. As a brand, they 'believe that Woolworths have a responsibility to use their business platform to make a broader contribution to the world around us.' (Woolworths Holdings Ltd 2023). This is evidenced through their pro-LGBTQ+ campaigns.

Although brand bravery is often operationalized by the tactical actions of brands, such as their marketing communication campaigns, these campaigns connect with consumers emotionally. Therefore, the novel brand bravery archetype is more than a business strategy or tactic; it emulates a brand's distinct identity (Jain et al. 2021). Actively participating in sustainability practices and being inclusive, thus, can portray a brand as upholding its core values and distinct identity (Jain et al. 2021; Jung, Kim, and Kim 2020). Consumers' growing environmental consciousness has prompted businesses to take a more active approach, as environmental sustainability is now regarded as a value shared by producers and consumers (Sarkar, Handique, and Talukdar 2023). Being seen as environmentally sustainable establishes a distinct stance in the minds of consumers (Sarkar, Handique, and Talukdar 2023).

Similarly, engaging in inclusive communications, such as pro-LGBTQ+ campaigns, positions the brand as distinctive. Inclusive marketing may be seen as a 'response to diversity' that aims to encompass the scope of diversity (e.g. ethnicity, sexual orientation, age) in the market space (Baek, Lee, and Oh 2023, 868).

Woolworths has built a part of its brand identity around environmental sustainability and inclusivity; however, this does not come without risk, as consumers' favorable attitudes may be considerably reduced if they disagree with a brand's perspective on a particular socio-political issue (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), such as Woolworths' pro-LGBTQ+ campaign. Woolworths is not alone in this, as brands often face criticism for taking a stance on societal issues and are even branded as 'woke' for using rainbow washing. For example, The Warehouse, a New Zealand retailer, faced online backlash for selling products from Disney's Pride collection and retailers like Target and Kohl's for their Pride product lines (Murray 2023).

Unfortunately, some brands use social issues as part of their marketing campaigns without implementing change. According to Sobande (2019), woke bravery involves brands portraying images that appear allied with specific issues but that structurally are not. In environmental sustainability, woke bravery can be referred to as greenwashing, and regarding inclusivity, rainbow washing. Ultimately, brands must show symmetry between their purpose, values, messaging, and practice for bravery to be successful (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

Woolworths may be considered brave in environmental sustainability as its devotion to sustainability reflects *altruism*, while its commitment to inclusivity is deemed being *determined*. For example, it no longer sells plastic shopping bags despite consumers considering this an inconvenience. In developing countries, consumers tend to prefer

disposable plastic bags because of their minimal cost (Misgana and Tucho 2022). Woolworths further actively promotes its sustainability practices in-store, on its online and social sites, and through advertising. Woolworths also strives to be inclusive and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, as is evident in its 'Be an Ally' promotional campaign (Woolworths 2023).

Altruism bravery: environmental sustainability

The United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 refers to 'ensuring sustainable consumption and production' (UN 2023). This is echoed by the fact that environmental sustainability is becoming more and more significant to consumers. It is strategically important to brands (Gelderman et al. 2021) as it provides a competitive advantage and increases sales (Kronthal-Sacco and Whelan 2019).

Green advertising, which aims to inform stakeholders of environmental efforts, can be defined as 'advertising that manages the relationship between a product and the biophysical environment, encourages a green lifestyle, or demonstrates a corporate image of environmental responsibility' (Banerjee, Gulas, and Iyer 1995).

Woolworths considers and manages its sustainable business practices using financial, environmental, and social indicators. The company bears direct responsibility for the whole lifecycle of its products, including lessening their direct environmental consequences (Dos Santos, Svensson, and Padin 2013). This implies that their marketing aligns with their actions, invalidating 'woke bravery' or 'greenwashing' labels.

Furthermore, Woolworths incorporates sustainability as a central company value (Woolworths Holdings Ltd 2011). Consumers' preference to make environmentally sustainable purchases is hindered by a lack of perceived credibility and honesty in advertising, particularly greenwashing (Leire and Thidell 2005). We follow a similar viewpoint as Hartmann et al. (2023), who initiated their work on advertising and climate change from the idea that advertising is an agent for forming consumer preferences and actions beyond buying. Our first study, thus, utilized a promotional message from Woolworths highlighting an environmental issue.

Determined bravery: inclusive marketing communication – pro-LGBTQ

The central premise of SDGs is 'Leaving no one behind', and more specifically, SDG 10.2 aims to reduce inequality by taking measures to 'empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or any other status' (UN 2024). Marketing can play an important role in promoting diversity and reducing discrimination by embracing inclusivity in marketing communications. Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen (2017) showed that it is beneficial for brands to challenge societal norms pro-actively rather than reactively. Thus, leading the way for inclusive marketing regarding marginalized consumers, such as the LGBTQ+ community, could benefit the brand.

Taking a public stance on divisive societal issues, such as inclusivity, to respond to changing consumer needs is considered a form of brand bravery (Jain et al. 2021). Research has shown that this type of brand bravery could be beneficial as consumers prefer brands that support the LGBTQ+ community (Kemp 2023). As consumers become aware and interested in socio-political issues, brands are more inclined to

communicate their take on key societal issues, such as inclusivity, *via* their advertising campaigns (Cristobal et al. 2022). However, Clements (2017) warns that while brands may think they communicate representation and inclusivity, it could be perceived as misrepresentation or exploitation. For example, Corner (2019) reports that although consumers support pro-LGBTQ advertising, LGBTQ consumers often feel that it is an attempt at rainbow washing and even diminishes brand equity (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

Given Woolworths' vision to be one of the world's most responsible retailers through its *Inclusive Justice Initiative*, the brand has chosen to take action on several societal issues, such as diversity and inclusion (Woolworths Holdings Ltd 2023). Our second study, thus, utilized a Woolworths Pro-LGBTQ+ promotional campaign ('Be an ally'), highlighting their stance on inclusivity.

Advertising effectiveness

Considering the credibility challenges of sustainability and inclusivity claims in communications and consumers' possible negative reactions, the effectiveness of such advertisements becomes a related issue to explore. Many studies have emphasized the importance of attitude toward the advertisement, attitude towards the brand, and purchase intent in representing advertising effectiveness (Mackenzie and Lutz 1989; Spears and Singh 2004; Wulandari and Darma 2020). In our study, we use the term 'advertising effectiveness' to include the marketing communications operationalized through an advertisement in Study I and a communication campaign in Study II.

Attitude toward the advertisement (A_{AD}) is a propensity to react positively or negatively to a specific advertisement stimulus during a particular exposure occasion (Lutz, Mackenzie, and Belch 1983). An attitude toward an advertisement is created by consumers evaluating the visual or verbal message and its content (Sander et al. 2021). Schmuck et al. (2018) show that misleading environmental claims lead to negative feelings that poorly affect consumers' attitudes toward the advertisement.

Attitude toward the brand (A_b) is defined as 'recipients' affective reactions toward the advertised brand' (Lutz, Mackenzie, and Belch 1983). Vredenburg et al. (2020) reported that brand attitudes improve when engaging with a socio-political cause that is positively aligned with a brand. This can be said of Woolworths through its 'good business journey' efforts and its *'Inclusive Justice Initiative'*. According to Schmuck et al. (2018), environmental sustainability advertisements lead to higher brand attitudes and greater purchase intent. Ginder and Byun (2015) report that organizations that are seen as authentically pro-gay ('gay-friendly') often enjoy favorable brand attitudes, and Lim, Ciszek, and Moon (2022) suggest that authentic LGBTQ communication increases brand attitudes as well as purchase intent. Furthermore, brand bravery will likely result in positive attitudes and behavioral intentions (Lee et al. 2024; Jain et al. 2021). Purchase intention refers to the individual's evaluation of their likely future brand purchase (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986).

Consumer-brand identification

Consumer-brand identification is '...a cognitive state of self-categorization' wherein consumers see a brand as representing their self-concept (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003, 77). It can be simply described as consumers' sense of sameness (i.e. congruency)

with a particular brand. Social identity theory outlines how brands can represent consumers' self-identities (Lam, Ahearne, and Schillewaert 2012) and suggests that consumers use brands they perceive to represent their identities. Jain et al. (2021) propose that brand bravery allows consumers to evaluate the level of similarity between the brand and the self. Thus, consumers can use brand bravery to express their beliefs.

Consumers tend to be positive towards brands whose image reflects the image they want to express (Jain et al. 2021). When a brand meets consumers' expectations, there will be strong self-brand identification, leading consumers to be content because it reinforces their attitude toward the brand (He and Li 2011). Brand bravery will thus positively influence consumer-brand identification (Jain et al. 2021). Hence, if consumers perceive congruity between the brand and their self-image, such a match (e.g. consumer-brand identification) will lead to favorable brand attitudes and behaviors (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, and Sirgy 2012). Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model of the paper.

Hypotheses development

Brand bravery and attitudes

Torres and Briggs (2007) found that when consumers strongly identify with peripheral cues in an advertisement (e.g. brand bravery), it increases advertisement relevance and results in a positive advertisement attitude (A_{AD}). Since bravery is linked with bold acts, consumers' emotions may motivate them to promote and support brands they view as brave. A favorable evaluation of the brand's sustainable practices and its stand on social issues (inclusivity) may lead to a positive brand attitude (A_B) (Quezado, Fortes, and Cavalcante 2022; Lee et al. 2024; Jain et al. 2021). If consumers agree with the message or values portrayed in the brave brand's communications, their attitudes will be favorable (Noland 2021).

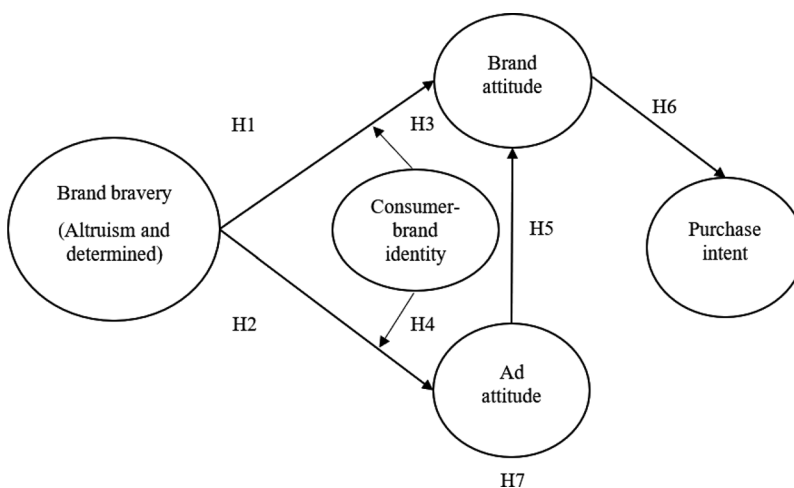


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Note: In Study I brand bravery refers to *altruism*, while Study II refers to *determined*.

Social identity theory helps to explain why customers may be more likely to be positive about a brand that demonstrates brand bravery, as it may foster a sense of shared identity with the group concern for which the brand is advocating, thereby aligning the consumer's values with those portrayed by the brand. Jain et al. (2021) found that the direct effects of brand bravery on A_B are significant. Similarly, woke (e.g. responding to social or political issues) advertisements, which can be seen as brave, enhance overall consumer attitude (Cristobal et al. 2022). Considering this, we propose that brand bravery may influence retail shoppers' attitudes.

Considering the literature, the paper sets the following relational hypotheses:

H₁: Brand bravery has a significant, positive relationship with A_B .

H₂: Brand bravery has a significant, positive relationship with A_{AD} .

Moderating role of consumer-brand identity

Sustainable consumption is one of the core values of consumers today (Zameer and Yasmeen 2022). Not only have LGBTQ consumers become a sizeable consumer segment (Demunter and Bauwens 2023), but consumers who value inclusivity and are pro-LGBTQ+ are more positive towards brands that align with their beliefs (Ready et al. 2020).

Subsequently, consumers tend to prefer brands they identify with and share the same core values (Yeh, Wang, and Yieh 2016), such as engaging in environmentally sustainable practices and inclusivity. When consumers and brands have similar beliefs and values, it creates a sense of belonging and emotional connection (Berrozpe, Campo, and Yagüe 2019). Consequently, consumer-brand identity plays a significant role in enhancing positive consumer-brand relationships (Roggeveen et al. 2021). When a brand meets consumers' expectations, there will be stronger consumer-brand identification, leading consumers to be content because it reinforces their attitude toward the brand (He and Li 2011). As a result, consumer-brand identity can influence important brand outcomes. It is generally agreed that the higher the consumer's connection with the brand, the more likely the consumer's behavior toward the brand will be favorable (Kuenzel and Halliday 2010). Consequently, consumer-brand identity produces positive advertisement attitudes (Graham and Wilder 2020). Should customers find congruence with the brand's values, one could expect that this feeling of 'oneness' with the brand would positively impact how consumers respond to brand advertisements.

Furthermore, consumer-brand identity has links to the key tenets of social identity theory. The more congruent the self-brand image, the stronger the consumer-brand relationship. Considering that a specific role identity of a consumer can be triggered in a normative-congruent situation (Chattaraman, Lennon, and Rudd 2010), marketing communication that aligns with that role identity ('is me') may trigger a higher consumer-brand identity. Therefore, we argue that when consumers perceive a brand as congruent with their self-identity, they are more likely to consider brand-related information positively, leading to a more positive attitude toward the advertisement. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H₃: Consumer-brand identity moderates the relationship between brand bravery and A_B.

H₄: Consumer-brand identity moderates the relationship between brand bravery and A_{AD}.

Attitudes and purchase intent

A_{AD} and A_B and their influence on purchase intent have been evidenced in previous studies (Bravo and Lee 2020; Lafferty, Goldsmith, and Newell 2002; Lim, Moon, and Ciszek 2024; Muda et al. 2014). Furthermore, advertisements reinforcing the consumer-brand identity increase purchase intent (Bhattacharjee, Berger, and Menon 2014). Considering the literature, it is hypothesized that:

H₅: There is a significant positive relationship between A_{AD} and A_B.

H₆: There is a significant positive relationship between A_B and purchase intent.

Mediating role of attitudes towards the advertisement

The relational hypotheses shown in Figure 1 propose that brand bravery is positively associated with the brand and advertisement attitude, and the latter is positively related to brand attitude. These paths suggest that A_{AD} may play a mediating role in the relationship between bravery and A_B. Cristobal et al. (2022) suggest that woke advertising, which is considered to be brave, presents a positive brand image that results in favorable attitudes. This implies that advertising relating to pressing social issues (thus, brave advertising) may enhance the relationship between the brand's brave image and A_B. Hence, we propose that it is likely that A_{AD} will mediate the relationship between brand bravery and A_B.

H₇: A_{AD} mediates the relationship between brand bravery and A_B.

Materials and methods

Sampling and data collection

The paper explores the effectiveness of Woolworths' green advertisements featured on Facebook (Study I) and the effectiveness of a pro-LGBTQ+ campaign run across their social media and in-store (Study II). Self-completion surveys developed via Qualtrics were distributed after ethical approval (EMS075/22 and EMS045/24) was obtained from the researchers' university. Diagnostic tests on an independent sample of 30 respondents, including descriptive information, such as the distribution (e.g. skewness and kurtosis) to determine if any problematic response patterns are observed, revealed no major concerns for either study.

Study I

A Woolworths Facebook advertisement was chosen as the company has increased advertising on social media since 2011 (Woolworths Holdings Ltd 2011), and they have a significant following on Facebook, with over two million fans. The focal

advertising message ([Appendix A](#)) was run on World Water Day 2022 on Facebook and promoted how Woolworths attempts to save water in its business processes. Convenience sampling was used to select adult South African Woolworths shoppers who are active Facebook users.

Study II

For study II, visuals from a pro-LGBTQ+ campaign run by Woolworths in June 2023 were selected to establish views on brand bravery when a brand supports a more polarizing socio-political issue. The campaign ([Appendix A](#)) ran across various media (e.g. in-store, online, and social media), featured the tagline 'Be an Ally' and indicated support for the LGBTQ+ community. Study II used convenience sampling *via* a research panel from TGM Research to select South African Woolworths shoppers.

Questionnaires and measures

The questionnaires were similar, except for the focal stimuli. Demographic measures included gender, race, and income. Multi-item 7-point Likert-type scales with scale points ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) were used to measure brand bravery (Study I: altruism five items; Study II: determined four items, Jain et al. 2021); purchase intent (four items, Spears and Singh 2004); and consumer-brand identity (four items, Jain et al. 2021). Semantic differential scales measured A_{AD} and A_B (five and six items, respectively, Spears and Singh 2004). Please refer to [Appendix A](#) for the measures.

Data analysis

SPSS was used to complete descriptive analyses, followed by structural equation modeling (SEM) using Amos (v. 29). Model fit was assessed as follows: RMSEA < 0.08; CFI and TLI > 0.9; and CMIN/DF < 5 (West, Taylor, and Wu 2012). Reliability and validity measures included convergent validity (Cronbach's Alpha and CR > 0.7; average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.5); discriminant validity (correlations between constructs < square root of AVE, and HTMT < 0.85) (Voorhees et al. 2016).

Results

The final sample for study I consisted of 364 respondents featuring 86.2% females and 13.5% males (0.3% declined to answer); the average age was 51.4 ($SD = 16.1$). The most frequent response for racial identity was white (Caucasian) (78.2%), followed by 7.2% black African (as per the categories specified by Statistics South Africa). A monthly disposable household income category of R25,001–R45,000 ($\pm \$1,338$ – $\$2,409$) was the modal category with 22.7% of the respondents, and 60% shopped at Woolworths weekly. This reflects a sample that suits the paper's purpose as the respondents have experience with the retail brand and reflect the socio-demographic characteristics of the retailer's consumers (Woolworths Holdings Ltd 2022).

For study II, 471 fully completed questionnaires were received. The sample featured a more balanced gender distribution of 42.9% males and 57.1% females and an average age of 34.7 ($SD=12.1$). Racial classification was 68.8% black African, followed by 17.8% white (Caucasian), and the most prevalent income category was R15 500 ($\pm\$850$) or less. The largest portion of respondents (39.1%) reported that they shop at Woolworths 2–3 times per month, followed by regular shoppers (30.1%). This sample, thus, has experience with the brand. Despite the lower reported income levels, they represent an aspirational younger consumer group using the store.

Measurement model, reliability, validity, and structural model

The measurement models for both studies showed an acceptable fit. Study I: CMIN/DF: 2.089; RMSEA: 0.055; TLI: 0.970; CFI: 0.974. Study II: CMIN/DF: 2.055; RMSEA: 0.047; TLI: 0.981; CFI: 0.984. Reliability and convergent validity were acceptable (Table 1), as was discriminant validity, considering that the inter-construct correlations were less than the square root of the AVE for all constructs for both studies, except brand attitude and ad attitude for Study I. A follow-up HTMT analysis (0.884) confirmed liberal discriminant validity between these constructs (Voorhees et al. 2016).

Relational hypothesis testing

The results of Study I supported all the relational hypotheses. Brand bravery (altruism) was significantly related to both A_B ($p < 0.001$; $Beta=0.148$) and A_{AD} ($p < 0.001$; $Beta=0.610$), supporting H_1 and H_2 in agreement with the literature (Jain et al. 2021; Torres and Briggs 2007). Similarly, there was support for H_5 as A_{AD} and A_B were significantly related ($p < 0.001$; $Beta=0.797$). A_B had a significant relationship with purchase intent ($p < 0.001$; $Beta=0.556$) in support of H_6 , which is consistent with the literature (Bravo and Lee 2020; Muda et al. 2014).

In Study II, we controlled for brand familiarity (six items, modified from Kent and Allen 1994; and Simonin and Ruth 1998) as the more familiar consumers are with a brand, the more likely they are to form positive attitudes towards it. In Study II, H_1 was not supported as there was no significant relationship between brand bravery

Table 1. Constructs, reliability, and validity.

Construct	Mean (SD)		Cronbach's α		CR		AVE	
	Study I	Study II	Study I	Study II	Study I	Study II	Study I	Study II
Brand bravery	5.0 (1.283)	5.7 (1.137)	0.965	0.850	0.964	0.854	0.529	0.595
Altruism (Study I)								
Determined (Study II)								
Attitude toward the advertisement	5.6 (1.177)	5.6 (1.640)	0.908	0.945	0.912	0.909	0.635	0.716
Brand attitude	5.8 (1.197)	5.8 (1.670)	0.955	0.969	0.955	0.970	0.808	0.865
Purchase intent	5.4 (1.313)	6.0 (1.261)	0.955	0.954	0.948	0.954	0.819	0.840
Consumer-brand identity	3.6 (1.679)	5.1 (1.559)	0.937	0.929	0.902	0.929	0.753	0.765

The structural models also showed acceptable fit: Study I – RMSEA = 0.061, CFI = 0.968, TLI = 0.963, CMIN/DF = 2.370; Study II – RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.955, TLI = 0.950, CMIN/DF = 2.844.

(determined) and A_B . However, H_2 , H_5 , and H_6 were supported as brand bravery (determined) had a significant, positive relationship with A_{AD} ($p < 0.001$; $Beta = 0.436$), A_{AD} and A_B had a significant positive relationship ($p < 0.001$; $Beta = 0.838$), and there was a significant positive relationship between A_B and purchase intent ($p < 0.001$; $Beta = 0.508$).

Mediation and moderation results

The study used the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval analysis and associated significance value of the indirect effect to test the mediation hypotheses (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010), where a confidence interval that does not contain zero (significant p -value) shows mediation. If mediation occurred, the direct effect was examined to determine whether the type of mediation was full or partial. A significant direct effect suggests partial mediation, and a non-significant direct effect full mediation.

The results showed that H_7 (ad attitude as a mediator between brand bravery and brand attitude) was supported (indirect effect = 0.479, CI = 0.395–0.559, $p = 0.008$; direct effect = 0.155, CI = 0.061–0.291, $p = 0.011$) for Study I, and ad attitude was a partial mediator. For study II, A_{AD} was a full mediator between brand bravery and brand attitude (indirect effect = 0.366, CI = 0.278–0.486, $p = 0.007$; direct effect = -0.004, CI = -0.073–0.064, $p = 0.902$).

We proposed two moderating effects: consumer-brand identity (CBI) on the relationship between brand bravery (altruism and determined) and A_{Br} , as well as A_{AD} (H_3 and H_4 , respectively). Multi-group CFA analyses tested for moderation, evidenced when the chi-square difference between the constrained and unconstrained models for high and low CBI (grouping composed through median splitting) exceeded 3.84, as Awang (2014) suggested.

The results provided support for the moderation hypotheses. For Study I, CBI moderated the relationship between altruism brand bravery and A_B (chi-square differences: low CBI = 87; high CBI = 81), supporting H_3 . An investigation of the slopes in Figure 2 suggests that CBI strengthens the relationship between brand bravery and A_B slightly more for lower CBI (slope value of 0.609) than for higher CBI consumers (slope value of 0.322).

H_4 was supported as CBI was also a moderator in the relationship between altruism brand bravery and A_{AD} (chi-square differences: low CBI = 26; high CBI = 33), as reflected in Figure 3. The slopes suggest a slightly stronger relationship for lower values of CBI (slope value of 0.507) than for higher values of CBI (slope value of 0.353).

The Study II results confirmed CBI as a moderator (H_3) between determined brand bravery and A_B (chi-square differences: low CBI = 50.1; high CBI = 70.4). As per Figure 4, the slopes suggest that CBI enhances the relationship between brand bravery and A_{Br} , showing a stronger effect for consumers with low CBI (slope value of 0.528) than for consumers with high CBI (slope value of 0.061). CBI was not a moderator between determined brand bravery and A_{AD} , not supporting H_4 (chi-square difference: low CBI = 0.9; high CBI = 7.1).

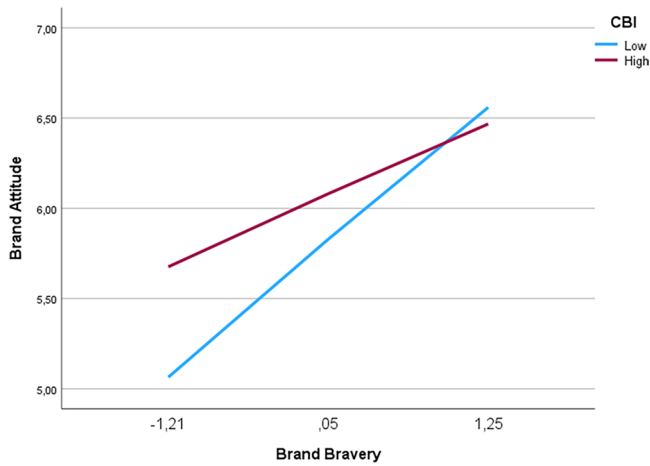


Figure 2. Study I. CBI moderation slopes – brand bravery and A_B .

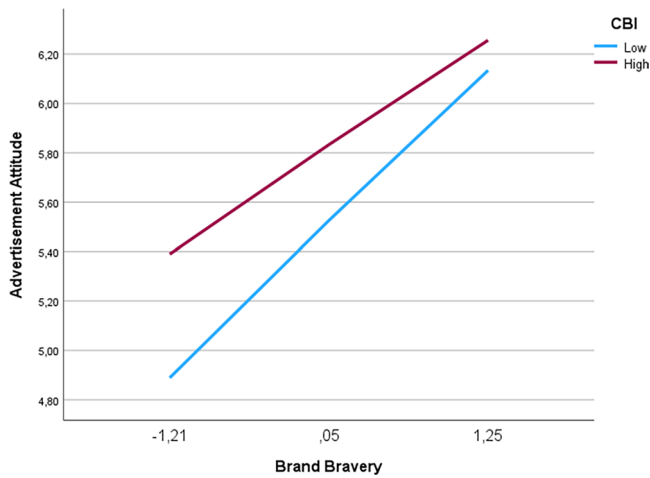


Figure 3. Study I. CBI moderation slopes – brand bravery and A_{AD} .

Discussion

In today’s dynamic world, brands are often challenged with situations that require them to be brave – from taking a stand on controversial issues to responding to changing market needs, such as environmental sustainability. Marketing plays a crucial part in addressing worldwide environmental issues by influencing society’s consumption patterns. More specifically, brands can drive change in production and consumption practices (Chkanikova and Mont 2015) and, in so doing, respond to SDG 12, ensuring sustainable consumption and production (UN 2023).

Similarly, brands can influence the communication space and social narrative by supporting marginalized communities. This was the case with the Woolworths ‘Be an Ally’ campaign. Standing up for marginalized consumers – especially regarding

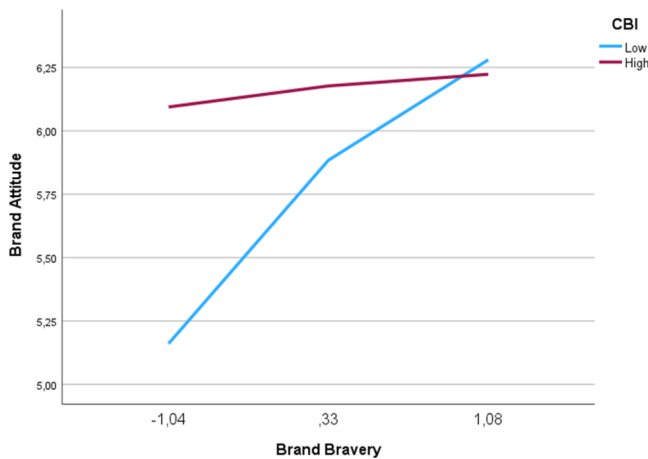


Figure 4. Study II. CBI moderation slope – brand bravery and A_B .

non-conforming gender or sexuality aspects – is risky, as evidenced by several instances of negative feedback against brands taking this route. For example, Bud Light faced severe backlash and boycotts from conservative groups after running a social media campaign featuring a transgender person (Liukonyte, Tuchman, and Zhu 2024).

The Study I results show that promoting a brand as environmentally sustainable is considered brave to a moderately high degree ($M=5$) in this emerging market context. In agreement with the literature, altruism brand bravery influenced A_{AD} and A_B . This suggests that for this study's respondents, the perceived altruism bravery of the retailer concerning environmental sustainability advertising was important in driving their attitudes. The higher *Beta* value for A_{AD} (0.610) suggests that altruism bravery is a stronger predictor of positive advertisement attitude than brand attitude. As the respondents were regular Woolworths shoppers, their attitudes toward the brand may be established and not as much affected by altruism bravery.

Study II shows that taking a stance on a controversial social issue (pro-LGBTQ+) is highly brave ($M=5.7$). Determined bravery was positively associated with A_{AD} but not A_B . This suggests that determined bravery predicts favorable attitudes towards a pro-LGBTQ+ themed campaign, whereas it does not predict a favorable brand attitude. This is not totally out of line with the results of study I, given that although significant, the effect was relatively weak ($B=0.148$). It may be due to the respondents' pre-existing favorable brand attitudes not being susceptible to change even if a brand takes a stance on an issue.

The respondents reported very favorable attitudes toward the 'World Water Day' advertisement and the 'Be an Ally' campaign (both $M=5.6$). These results confirm that the marketing communications were very favorably received for both the sustainability advertisement and the pro-LGBTQ+ campaign. Further, brand attitudes were highly positive (both $M=5.8$), highlighting that showcasing 'being brave', whether determined or altruistic, is well received by customers and aids towards building positive attitudes. The relationship between A_{AD} and A_B was significantly positive for both studies, which aligns with previous research. Purchase intent in both studies was high (Study I, $M=5.4$; Study II, $M=6.0$), and the relationship between A_B and purchase intent was

significantly positive for both studies, in agreement with the literature (Bravo and Lee 2020; Muda et al. 2014). These results suggest that the marketing communications for both sustainability and inclusivity contexts were effective. This supports the notion that despite the risks involved in promoting brave stances, it ultimately pays off in higher purchase intent.

The vital role of attitude toward the advertisement in a brave context was supported in both studies as it was a mediator in the relationship between brand bravery and brand attitude. The Study I partial mediation confirms that an effective advertisement significantly affects brand attitude when communicating bravery. The direct relationship between altruism bravery and brand attitude was significant, yet not strong ($Beta=0.155$). The indirect effect of ad attitude ($Beta=0.479$) on that relationship is moderate, signifying a definite contribution. Thus, an effective ad is important in facilitating favorable brand attitudes for sustainability advertising.

For Study II, ad attitude fully mediated the relationship between determined bravery and attitude towards the brand. Here, the full mediating effect suggests that an effective message is crucial for inclusivity communication to elicit a favorable brand attitude.

The confirmation of the moderating effect of CBI on the relationships between altruism bravery and A_B and A_{AD} for Study 1 suggests that it is important to be cognizant of how the consumer identifies with the brand when creating sustainability promotional messages that incorporate the altruism aspects of bravery.

Interestingly, lower CBI had a slightly stronger moderating effect than higher CBI. Thus, for consumers with lower CBI, the influence of altruism bravery will be more substantial on their brand and ad attitudes. Consumers who do not identify strongly with a brand may rely on other cues to shape favorable attitudes. Here, the brand's altruism bravery cues are likely more noticeable as the CBI is lower, and the sustainability brand identity presents a framework through which promotional messages can be interpreted. For consumers who identify strongly with the brand and, thus, its identity, the consumer-brand relationship may be rooted in their existing attitudes, and marketing cues may be less influential.

For Study II, CBI moderated only the relationship between determined bravery and A_B , suggesting that consumer identification with the brand will favorably impact the relationship between determined bravery and A_B . The overall CBI for Study II was higher than for Study I ($M=5.1$ vs. 3.6). It may be that the higher CBI for the second sample plays a more definitive role. Thus, the 'aspirational' consumers generally identify more with the brand.

The role of CBI was supported in both studies, showing that the effect of brave communications is enhanced when CBI is present. This was true for a 'mild' bravery context (sustainability), as well as for a context that is socially more polarizing (pro-LGBTQ+).

Implications

It seems as if a brand could be perceived as brave with its resulting positive outcomes no matter the 'degree of being brave' or which one of the dimensions, altruistic or

determined, as proposed by Jain et al. (2021), brands choose to focus on. Since retailers, such as Woolworths are uniquely positioned to influence change in production and consumption, as they are mediators between producers, manufacturers, and consumers (Chkanikova and Mont 2015), being brave in their marketing communications is one way of propelling change.

The results show that Woolworths' brand bravery is seen as altruistic in terms of environmentally sustainable advertising and determined when promoting pro-LGBTQ+ messages. The brand's perceived altruism – acting in a manner that benefits the broader society – rings true, as evidenced by its sustainable business practices. This is also beneficial to the brand, as is shown by altruism bravery's favorable influence on brand attitude. Additionally, altruism bravery's positive relationship with ad attitude suggests that the brand's advertisements portraying altruistic support for environmental issues will likely be seen as positive.

Similarly, Woolworths is perceived as highly determined through its strong pro-LGBTQ+ stance across promotional platforms. This perceived determination was favorably associated with respondents' attitudes towards the 'Be an Ally' campaign. Both studies' results suggest that promotional messages from brands known to take a stand on social issues will likely be received positively.

Hartmann et al. (2023) recommend that organizations prioritize combating greenwashing, which can be done *via* certification systems, regulating advertising practices, and other interventions. One way to combat greenwashing is by considering the Green Claims Code, which asserts that advertisements must be clear and unambiguous, truthful, accurate, fair, and meaningful, not omit relevant information, consider the life cycle of the product, and be substantiated (CMA 2022).

Similarly, organizations should avoid rainbow washing by ensuring that their communications align with their actions (Wulf et al. 2022), which can be substantiated by integrating messages across platforms, as in Study II. When brands present advertisements portraying bravery, they should connect with consumers' views to 'tap into' the consumer-brand identity and drive behavior, such as supporting pro-environmental organizations or the marginalized LGBTQ+ community.

The results of both studies imply that building consumer-brand identity is a good strategy to enhance consumers' attitudes toward the brand and its marketing communications. This could be achieved by appealing to the consumer's social self in the context of their in-group from a brand-supporter perspective, such as 'Woolworths people care' or by incorporating the nickname 'Woolies', that shoppers use to fondly refer to Woolworths, in their advertising campaigns, for example, 'Be water-wise with Woolies'.

Communication effectiveness is crucial for environmental sustainability advertising (Krstić, Kostić-Stanković, and Cvijović 2021) and inclusive communications, allowing brands to communicate with marginalized consumers without alienating the majority group (Han and Tsai 2016). Our paper provides theoretical insights into the effectiveness of marketing communication messages, considering two approaches to brand bravery: altruism and determination. In addition to expanding our understanding of brand bravery's role in advertising effectiveness, these relationships create a foundation for future investigations, leading to further theoretical development. Additionally, our

study confirms the overarching brand bravery archetype as both the altruism and determined dimensions resulted in similar positive outcomes. Our study provides empirical evidence of how these constructs interrelate in a developing country by providing findings from an African context.

Thus, to answer the question: Does fortune favor the brave? Indeed, it does, as brave marketing communications resulted in positive advertising effectiveness. When brands act bravely, these acts must align with the brand and consumers' values, and advertisements or marketing communication efforts represent a very successful vehicle for communicating bravery.

Limitations and future research

Despite the study's contributions, some limitations need to be noted. The generalizability of the results is limited due to the non-probability sampling method and the focus on one retailer and one industry. We did not control for brand familiarity in Study I; however, we controlled for it in Study II. This study focused on two theorized dimensions of brand bravery; future research should examine other dimensions in suitable contexts. Verlegh (2023) states that organizations are expected to address important societal issues by engaging in brand activism. The brand used in both studies was deemed moderately brave in a sustainability context (altruism) while scoring moderate to high in determined bravery. Thus, future research could focus on the 'bold' dimension of bravery, for example, by studying a brand that engages in activism by using rebellious marketing communications or acting in a non-confirmatory manner to industry norms. Other theoretical viewpoints may bring additional insights. For example, self-verification theory may provide perspectives on how the self is validated through the consumer-brand relationship and brand identification. Lastly, the unforeseen finding that low (vs. high) CBI seems to drive effects across studies warrants further research on consumer-brand identity and brand bravery.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are stored in an institutional repository.

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Appendix A

Stimulus - Study I


WOOLWORTHS 

22 March 2022 · 

Today is #WorldWaterDay2022 

Water is close to the Woolies heart and feels particularly important given the droughts currently facing the Northern Cape and Eastern Cape.

We use water with care throughout our business. We use it responsibly in our manufacturing processes, we've educated close to 45 000 learners on its importance, installed 132 water tanks and 540+ handwashing stations at schools across South Africa.

To do your bit in providing sustainable water access to schools and communities, add the Woolies Water Fund as a beneficiary on your [MySchool](#) [MyVillage](#) [MyPlanet](#) card and give back each time you shop. 



Stimuli - Study II

Woolworths social media post



WOOLWORTHS

1 June 2023 · 🌐



It's International Pride Month! 🏳️‍🌈

At Woolies, we celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community year-round, and we're continuously working to better serve our LGBTQIA+ people and customers. Here are a few things we've done in this space in the last year:

We established an internal W.Pride task team to give voice to and address issues faced by the LGBTQIA+ community.

We've adapted our working wardrobe policy to recognise everyone's unique preferences to style, cultural or religious needs and gender identity or expression.

We've created a range of Pride merchandise and are donating funds to LGBTQIA+ support organisations.

We know that there's always more to be done, and we'll keep looking for ways to enable, uplift and celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community.

Woolworths in-store display



Link to the Twitter (now X) campaign: [X \(Twitter\) campaign](#)

Measures

Brand bravery

Altruism

Woolworths believes in the greater good

Woolworths goes above and beyond its own interest to benefit others

Woolworths is not afraid to adapt its strategies if it benefits society at large

Woolworths is willing to reinvent itself for a cause
Woolworths is socially responsible and employs sustainable business practices

Determined

Woolworths remains relentless and refuses to succumb to external power
Woolworths challenges the status quo
Woolworths is resolute and holds on to its values
The spirit of the Woolworths brand remains unshaken despite failures

Attitude towards the advertisement

Unpleasant - Pleasant
Unlikeable - Likeable
Boring - Interesting
Tasteless - Tasteful
Artless - Artful
Bad – Good

Brand attitude

Unappealing - Appealing
Bad - Good
Unpleasant - Pleasant
Unfavourable - Favourable
Unlikeable – Likeable

Purchase intent

I will definitely shop at Woolworths
I definitely intend on buying from Woolworths
In future, I will purchase from Woolworths
Woolworths is a shop I will probably purchase from

Consumer brand identity

The Woolworths brand represents who I am
The Woolworths brand helps me express my identity
The Woolworths brand is part of my sense of who I am
I feel personally connected to the Woolworths brand