

PREDICTORS OF CONSUMER AGGRESSION TOWARD INCLUSIVE BRANDS: A MIXED METHODS INVESTIGATION

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This mixed-methods study investigates aggressive consumer reactions toward inclusive brands. An online survey of 384 U.S. consumers and 20 in-depth interviews reveal that virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism predict consumer aggression through boycotts and negative publicity. Virtue signaling exhibits the strongest effect, suggesting consumers' desire to demonstrate moral virtue drives reactions most strongly. The theoretical implications indicate that single theories provide limited explanations; integrating complementary perspectives generates richer insights. Practically, empowerment-based strategies promoting dialogic communication, transparency, and stakeholder co-creation may minimize outrage and hostility while advancing inclusivity. Recognizing consumers' diverse motives allows tailored engagement to transform aggression into constructive dialogue, thereby advancing social good as the brands' ultimate purpose.

Keywords: Inclusive Branding, Consumer Aggression, Virtue Signaling, Moral Outrage, Tribalism, Social Identity

JEL Classification: M31, D12, D91, M14

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1. Introduction

Over recent years, there has been a notable rise in brands embracing progressive agendas and initiatives centered on diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility. These "inclusive brands" have become increasingly prevalent in the marketplace. However, this trend has also sparked aggressive consumer reactions and backlash from those who object to or disagree with the stances taken by these brands (Creyer et al., 2003). Such consumer aggression can manifest in various forms, including brand boycotts, negative publicity campaigns, legal challenges, and coordinated efforts to "cancel" brands on social media platforms (Klein et al., 2004; Saldanha et al., 2022).

Gaining a deeper understanding of the factors driving these aggressive consumer behaviors toward inclusive brands is crucial, as these reactions represent a significant challenge for brands aiming to promote diversity and social progress. Unpacking the complex psychosocial mechanisms that motivate such counterintuitive behaviors (Penaloza & Price, 1993) is essential. In other words, a wide range of personal, psychological, social, and cultural challenges facing consumers are caused by the pressure of the dense currents of today's market (Hajisafi, 2023), which manifests itself in the form of consumer aggression. This study is motivated by the need to understand and address the growing phenomenon of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands, which poses a significant threat to companies' diversity and inclusion efforts. By shedding light on the underlying drivers and mechanisms, this research aims to equip brands and policymakers with insights to mitigate such aggression and foster more constructive dialogue around social issues.

This work presents an integrated framework drawing on complementary theories - virtue signaling, moral outrage, and social identity - to elucidate the underpinnings of aggression toward inclusive branding. A multifaceted understanding is sought by systematically examining proposed links between signaling, provocation, identification, and conduct. This offers promise to advance current knowledge on this vital issue.

Examining the drivers of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands is important not only for brands and marketers, but also for broader society. Virtue signaling theory posits that consumers agree to signal their moral virtue and alignment with social norms to gain status within reference groups (Berthon et al., 2021; Agerup, 2022). Inclusive brands serve as moral symbols consumers can attack to demonstrate allegiances (Luedicke et al., 2010). Figuring out the role of virtue signaling in fueling consumer aggression can provide insights into the underlying social and psychological motivations at play.

Moreover, moral outrage theory suggests consumer aggression stems from anger at perceived moral violations by inclusive brands perceived as betraying consumers' values (Lindenmeier et al., 2012; Cronin et al., 2012). This outrage spurs desires for brand

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punishment and sanctioning (Baer, 2012; Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). Uncovering the dynamics of moral outrage in this context can shed light on the emotional and ethical factors influencing these aggressive reactions. Additionally, social identity theory suggests tribal antagonism toward outgroups represented by inclusive brands motivates consumer aggression (Brewer, 1999; Mishra & Bakry, 2021). Inclusive initiatives threaten group identities, amplifying aggression from those opposing diversity agendas (Hornsey, 2008; Brown, 2000). Exploring the role of tribalism and group identities in driving consumer aggression can reveal broader social and cultural forces at work, informing strategies to bridge divides and foster greater understanding and acceptance. By integrating these complementary theoretical perspectives, this study endeavors to generate a nuanced and profound grasp of the factors predicting consumer aggression toward inclusive brands, as well as the underlying psychological and group mechanisms explaining these relationships. To achieve this aim, this research tests an integrative conceptual model incorporating virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism as predictors of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands. The study employs a mixed methods approach including an online survey of 384 U.S. consumers and 20 in-depth interviews with self-identified aggressive consumers.

This study has implications for the development of more nuanced theories of complex consumer behaviors. Single explanations provide limited comprehension, whereas integrating complementary perspectives generates a more holistic insight. Additionally, from a pragmatic standpoint, the implications put forth by this study propose the implementation of inclusive brand strategies that prioritize dialogic communication, empowerment, and the embodiment of authentic value-driven leadership.

The embrace of diversity, equity, and inclusion by brands has unexpectedly given rise to a concerning phenomenon: overt consumer aggression. This complex issue extends beyond mere commercial interests, as it exposes fractures within our society and challenges the noble ideals of unity in our diverse environment. By weaving together theoretical perspectives from virtue signaling research, moral foundations theory, and intergroup dynamics, a comprehensive and enlightening framework emerges. Through the utilization of quantitative and qualitative data, we can empirically discern how consumers' quests for status affirmation, responses to perceived moral transgressions, and motivations rooted in group identification contribute to hostile actions against corporate inclusivity initiatives. This rigorous and impactful investigation provides crucial insights for promoting constructive societal discourse on diversity, while simultaneously safeguarding brands' essential efforts towards inclusion. These endeavors are not only imperative from a commercial standpoint but also align with our highest humanitarian ideals.

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2. Theoretical Framework

Aggressive consumer behaviors toward inclusive brands are complex phenomena driven by psychological, social, and situational factors. This study utilizes three interrelated theoretical perspectives - virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism - to form the research framework and shed light on this phenomenon. These theories point to individual motivations and group processes that may underlie consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

2.1. Virtue Signaling and Aggressive Consumer Reactions

Virtue signaling refers to actions performed primarily to communicate one's virtuous characteristics and moral values to others (Westra, 2021; Miller, 2019; Berthon et al., 2021). Consumers may engage in aggressive behaviors toward inclusive brands as a form of virtue signaling to conform to social norms within salient reference groups.

Inclusive brands have become symbols in the marketplace that communicate support for traditionally marginalized groups and social issues like diversity, inclusion, and sustainability (Schmidt & Ludlow, 2002; Henderson & Williams, 2013). These symbolic brand associations represent stances on social issues that not all consumers agree with (Agerup, 2022).

Aggressive consumer reactions to inclusive brands, whether through boycotts, negative reviews, or other behaviors, can serve as virtue signals of opposition to the values represented by such brands (Grappi et al., 2013; Reimann & Aron, 2014). Consumers may use their reactions to demonstrate their allegiance to social norms valuing traditionalism, conservatism, or opposition to liberal agendas perceived as morally dubious (Tetlock et al., 2007; Hornsey et al., 2018; Jost, 2017). For example, aggressive responses to Nike's advertising featuring Colin Kaepernick helped signal loyalty to pro-cop, pro-military cultural values prevalent in some groups (Li et al., 2021; Park, 2022). Similarly, anti-consumerism movements like "cancel culture" tend to celebrate the most visibly aggressive antagonists of controversial brands as moral standard-bearers and culture warriors (Waller & Waller, 2020; Demsar et al., 2021; Bouvier & Machin, 2021).

The desire to virtue signal also breeds intense "outrage competitions" where consumers strive to express the most morally indignant and punitive reactions possible (Westra, 2021). Outrage increases when consumers perceive their own moral standing and group identity to be threatened, escalating aggression toward the ostensible culprit (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017; Grappi et al., 2013). The strength of consumers' desire to signal moral virtue to uphold group belongingness predicts the extremity of aggression toward inclusive brands, even when consumers do not personally object to the brands' stances (Tetlock et al., 2007). Thus, virtue signaling dynamics provide a powerful explanatory mechanism for:

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H1: Virtue signaling positively predicts consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

2.2. Moral Outrage and Feelings of Betrayal

Moral outrage, the condemnation of perceived moral violations, also motivates consumer aggression toward inclusive brands (Shah et al., 2020; Tetlock et al., 2007). Consumers may experience outrage when encountering inclusive brand actions or campaigns perceived to contradict traditional moral norms and values.

This moral outrage is rooted in perceptions that inclusive brands have betrayed consumers' trust by embracing controversial social agendas (Koehler & Gershoff, 2003). Consumers develop relationships and loyalty toward brands based on confidence the brand shares their key values (Fournier, 1998). When inclusive brands express values consumers deem objectionable, feelings of betrayal arise (Fournier and Alvarez, 2012).

These moral betrayals generate resentment and outrage focused not just on the brand's actions, but on the brand itself as an object of condemnation (Reimann et al., 2018; Hornsey et al., 2018). Brands become symbolic embodiments of the values consumers find objectionable, fueling moral outrage and desires for punishment and sanctioning (Romani et al., 2015; Creyer et al., 2003).

Consumers channel their moral outrage toward inclusive brands through aggressive reactions aimed at sanctioning and punishing the perceived moral transgressor (Galeza, 2019; Kapitan, 2023). Boycotts, negative brand publicity, and legal challenges can satisfy desires to impose consequences for perceived moral deviations (Klein et al., 2004). Thus, moral outrage may motivate:

H2: Moral outrage positively predicts consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

2.3. Tribalism, Inclusivity Backlash, and "Cancel Culture"

Tribalism, or the tendency to organize into in-groups and out-groups, helps explain why consumers identify certain inclusive brands as worthy "out-groups" that deserve aggressive treatment (Lee & Kim, 2019; Devine et al., 2012; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Iyer et al., 2003).

Consumers join counter-cultures and subcultures opposing inclusive brands and diversity initiatives, strengthening their tribal and group identities (Cova & Cova, 2002; Thompson, 2006). In turn, these identities promote favoritism toward the in-group while breeding hostility toward out-groups represented by inclusive brands (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Brewer, 1999).

The perceived threat to traditional in-group values from inclusive brands' stances magnifies tribal hostility and aggression (Hornsey et al., 2003; Jetten et al., 1997; Kumar & Shankar,

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2023; Stephan et al., 2009). Consumers motivated by tribalism seek to aggress against and "cancel" inclusive brands to defend their group's norms, interests, and moral superiority (Barraza, 2021; Cova & White, 2010). For example, the backlash against "political correctness" often reflects tribal antagonism toward the values embodied by inclusive brands (Södergren, 2022; Chambers et al., 2013; Littler, 2017). Similarly, conservatives' hostile responses to "woke-scolding" are a component of a tribal conflict that pits traditionalist in-groups against "woke" out-groups that are aligned with inclusive brands (Thomason & Sitzmann, 2023). Thus, tribal dynamics may drive:

H3: Tribalism positively predicts consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

2.4. Relative Impact of Predictors

Previous research suggests that individual motives generally have a greater impact on behavior compared to group influences (Postmes et al., 2005). The measures used to assess different constructs may also vary in strength, distorting regression coefficients (Grau, 2007). While virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism are expected to positively predict consumer aggression, the strength of their effects may differ. At least one of the predictors is hypothesized to emerge as significantly more influential based on differences in underlying motivations, levels of analysis, and relationships with other variables. Therefore:

H4: One of virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism will have a relatively greater impact on consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

In summary, virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism point to the psychological, social, and group-based mechanisms that motivate consumer aggression toward inclusive brands. Combined, these theoretical perspectives form a broad yet complementary research framework for understanding this complex phenomenon.

2.5. Conceptual Model

This study proposes a conceptual model wherein virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism influence the emergence of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands, as shown below. The model posits that desire for virtue signaling, outrage toward perceived moral violations, and identification with counter-cultural tribes drive consumer aggression through individual and social psychological mechanisms. The model hypothesizes that:

H1: Virtue signaling positively predicts consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

H2: Moral outrage positively predicts consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

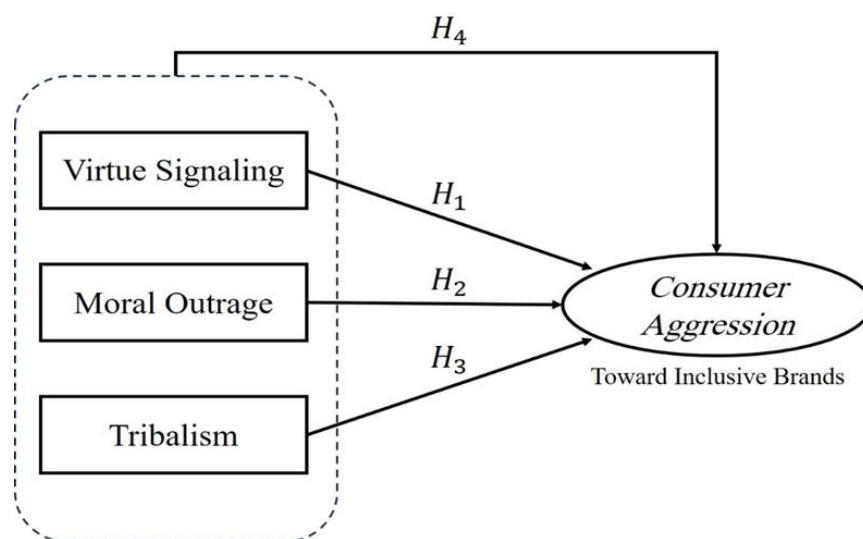
H3: Tribalism positively predicts consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

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H4: One of virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism will have a relatively greater impact on consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

The variables in the model represent distinct but interrelated motivations for consumer aggression. Desires for virtue signaling reflect individual social motives, whereas moral outrage represents an emotional reaction to perceived transgressions. Tribalism points to group identification processes that promote hostility toward out-groups. Together, these factors are hypothesized to explain consumer aggression through both direct and mediated relationships. The conceptual model serves as a framework to generate hypotheses, measures, and sampling criteria for the study. It also provides a lens for interpreting quantitative and qualitative data to gain a nuanced understanding of psychosocial mechanisms and social dynamics surrounding consumer aggression toward inclusive brands. Testing and refining the model's hypothesized relationships can offer practical insights into minimizing aggression and promoting civil discourse in the context of diversity and inclusion.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model, showing virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism as independent variables predicting consumer aggression as the dependent variable.



Source: Author's own work

Figure 1. The Conceptual Model

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3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands. The quantitative component utilized an online survey to empirically test the hypothesized relationships and effects predicted by the conceptual model. Complementing this, the qualitative interviews provided an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, motivations, and the nuanced group dynamics underlying their aggressive behaviors. By triangulating findings from both methods, the study aimed to uncover deeper insights and achieve a more holistic perspective on this multi-faceted issue.

3.1. Philosophical Foundations: Adopting a Pragmatic Paradigm

The underpinning philosophy to select a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques for this study stems from the need to comprehensively investigate the complex phenomenon of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands. This phenomenon is inherently multifaceted, shaped by various psychological, social, and group-based factors that cannot be fully captured through a single methodological lens. Therefore, the philosophical stance adopted in this research is one of pragmatism, which advocates for utilizing diverse methods and perspectives to gain a more holistic understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Morgan, 2007).

Specifically, the quantitative survey component aligns with a post-positivist paradigm, which assumes that an objective reality exists and can be approximated through empirical observation and measurement (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). The survey aims to test hypothesized relationships and effects predicted by the conceptual model by using established scales and statistical analyses, thereby uncovering generalizable patterns and trends within the broader population of consumers.

However, solely relying on quantitative methods would fail to capture the depth and nuances of individual experiences, motivations, and group dynamics that underlie aggressive consumer behaviors. To address this limitation, qualitative interviews are grounded in an interpretive paradigm, which recognizes that reality is socially constructed and can be understood through examining subjective meanings and lived experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The open-ended, exploratory nature of the interviews allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, emotions, and the intricate social and cultural contexts surrounding their aggression toward inclusive brands.

This mixed methods approach incorporates both quantitative and qualitative components and emphasizes the importance of using diverse methodological tools to address the research questions. The complementary strengths of each method compensate for the limitations of

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the other, resulting in a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

To summarize, the philosophical underpinning for selecting a mixed methods approach in this study is rooted in pragmatism, which values the use of multiple methods and viewpoints to gain a holistic understanding of complex social phenomena. By combining the strengths of post-positivist and interpretive paradigms, this research aims to uncover both generalizable patterns and rich contextual insights, ultimately shedding light on the multifaceted drivers and dynamics of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

3.2. Online Survey Design

The online survey measured respondents' levels of aggression toward inclusive brands as well as psychological, social, and demographic factors hypothesized to predict such behaviors. Several established scales were utilized:

- A. **Consumer Aggression:** Consumer aggression toward inclusive brands was measured using adapted versions of the consumer aggression scale developed by Fullerton and Punj (1993), Rose & Neidermeyer (1999), and Kähr et al. (2016). Items assessed behaviors like boycotts, negative word-of-mouth, and negative brand feedback.
- B. **Virtue Signaling:** Consumers' desire to signal moral virtue was measured using the virtue signaling scales created by Westra (2021), Miller (2019), Agerup (2022), and Berthon et al. (2021). Items captured motivations like the desire to be seen as morally righteous by others.
- C. **Moral Outrage:** Moral outrage toward inclusive brands was assessed using the moral outrage scales developed by Shah et al. (2020), Reimann et al. (2018), Lindenmeier et al. (2012), and Tetlock et al. (2007). Items measured the extent to which consumers experienced anger, disgust, betrayal, and contempt toward inclusive brands' stances on social issues.
- D. **Tribalism:** Consumers' identification with counter-cultures opposing inclusive brands was assessed using the tribal identity scales adapted from Lee & Kim (2019), Cova & White (2010), Escalas & Bettman (2003), Cova & Cova (2002), and Brewer (1999). Items measured feelings of belongingness and loyalty to subcultures antagonistic toward inclusive brands.

The survey also collected data on psychological variables like conservatism, dogmatism, and need for closure as well as demographic factors including age, income, gender, and education. As shown in Table 1, the constructs used in this study are determined based on independent and dependent variables based on previous research.

Table 1. Study's Constructs

Construct	Abbreviation	Variable Type	No. of Items	Source
Consumer Aggression	CA	Dependent	18	Fullerton & Punj (1993); Rose & Neidermeyer (1999); Kähr et al. (2016)

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Construct	Abbreviation	Variable Type	No. of Items	Source
Virtue Signaling	VS	Independent	17	Westra, (2021), Miller (2019), Aagerup (2022), Berthon et al. (2021)
Moral Outrage	MO	Independent	13	Shah et al. (2020), Reimann et al. (2018), Lindenmeier et al. (2012), Tetlock et al. (2007)
Tribalism	T	Independent	15	Lee & Kim (2019), Cova & White (2010), Escalas & Bettman (2003), Cova & Cova (2002), Brewer (1999)
Total Items			63	

Source: Compiled by the author based on the cited literature

Table 1 lists the main constructs assessed in the study and provides citations of relevant literature and scale sources. In total, regarding the constructs of the study, after the needs assessment and the necessary modifications of the study, 63 adapted questions were selected based on previous research.

3.3. Sampling Plan and Procedure

Due to the lack of an exhaustive list of the entire population, the necessary sample size was established using Cochran's sample size formula to determine a population proportion with a specified margin of error and confidence level. With a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, Cochran's formula yielded the required sample size of approximately 384 participants. This sample size was deemed appropriate to detect meaningful effects in the quantitative data analysis while remaining feasible given the study's resources. An online survey was developed and distributed using the Qualtrics sampling platform to obtain a nationally representative sample of 384 United States consumers aged 18 and older. Employing a nationally representative consumer sample enhanced the generalizability of findings to the broader U.S. population. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic, respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were assured in order to promote open and honest responses.

3.4. Interview Protocol Design

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 consumers identified as engaging in aggressive behaviors toward inclusive brands (e.g., boycotters, and brand antagonists online). Qualitative interviews allowed for an open-ended, exploratory examination of participants' subjective experiences, emotions, and group affiliations surrounding inclusive brand aggression - aspects difficult to fully capture through quantitative measures alone. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions to elicit rich, narrative data. The interview protocol was designed to: (1) corroborate quantitative findings about motivations for consumer aggression, (2) uncover additional motivations not covered in the survey, and (3) gain a deeper understanding of the social and group dynamics underlying participant's behaviors. Specific questions probed participants' experiences with and reactions to inclusive brands, the

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emotional and social factors driving those reactions, relationships with counter-cultural groups, and perceptions of morality and values. Follow-up questions and prompts were used to encourage elaboration and obtain thick description.

- A. **Recruitment:** To obtain an insightful sample, participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques focused on identifying consumers actively engaged in aggression toward inclusive brands. Initial participants were identified through online activism against inclusive brands (e.g., social media posts, comments, reviews). They were invited to participate and asked to refer other potentially eligible participants.
- B. **Procedure:** Interviews were conducted either in-person or by phone/online conferencing software, lasting 30 to 40 minutes. This flexible approach accommodated participants' preferences to encourage open dialogue. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed for analysis.

In summary, the mixed methods design combining a quantitative consumer survey and qualitative interviews with aggressive consumers facilitated a richly textured examination of this phenomenon. The complementary strengths of each method overcame individual limitations, allowing the study to uncover broader generalizable patterns as well as explore deeper individual experiences, motivations, and group influences driving consumer aggression toward inclusive brands.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a mixed methods approach, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The online survey data were analyzed using both SPSS and AMOS 24 statistical software packages. SPSS was used to conduct descriptive statistics and hierarchical multiple regression analysis. AMOS was then used to test the hypothesized structural model and generate a path diagram of significant relationships.

The sample ($N = 384$) had a mean age of 38 years ($SD = 13.2$) and consisted of 50.4% females. Most respondents were White (76.2%), with 12.4% Black, 7.3% Hispanic, and 4.1% from other ethnic groups. Regarding education, 27.1% had a high school degree, 36.2% had a Bachelor's degree, and 36.7% had a graduate or professional degree.

Table 2 shows means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables. Consumer aggression toward inclusive brands had a mean of 2.37 ($SD = 1.08$) on a 5-point scale. Virtue

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signaling had a mean of 3.51 (SD = 0.94), moral outrage 3.21 (SD = 1.13), and tribalism 3.12 (SD = 1.07).

As hypothesized, consumer aggression was positively correlated with virtue signaling ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), moral outrage ($r = .40$, $p < .001$), and tribalism ($r = .27$, $p < .001$). The independent variables were also moderately correlated with each other. Control variables including age, gender, and education showed some small yet significant correlations.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4
1. Consumer Aggression	2.37	1.08	-			
2. Virtue Signaling	3.51	0.94	.35***	-		
3. Moral Outrage	3.21	1.13	.40***	.28***	-	
4. Tribalism	3.12	1.07	.27***	.23***	.22***	-

Note. $N = 384$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Source: Primary data collected from the online survey

The correlation coefficients indicate significant positive relationships between all variables, as hypothesized. Consumer aggression correlates most strongly with virtue signaling and moral outrage.

Hierarchical multiple regression tested the hypothesized model, entering predictors in three steps:

Step 1: Control variables

Step 2: Virtue signaling

Step 3: Moral outrage and tribalism

The full model significantly predicted consumer aggression, $F(5,994) = 117.93$, $p < .001$, with an adjusted R^2 of .37. Table 3 shows the model summary.

Table 3. Model Summary and Fit

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	df1	df2
1	.23*	.05	.04	9.27	4	380
2	.48**	.23	.22	15.17	5	379
3	.61***	.37	.36	19.23	6	378

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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*Predictors of Consumer Aggression Toward Inclusive Brands: A Mixed Methods Investigation**Source: Statistical analysis of survey data using SPSS software*

For Model 1 with control variables, $R^2 = .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .04$, and $F(3, 380) = 9.27$, $p < .001$

For Model 2 with virtue signaling added, $\Delta R^2 = .18$, F change $(1, 379) = 15.17$, $p < .001$

For Model 3 with moral outrage and tribalism added, $\Delta R^2 = .14$, F change $(2, 378) = 19.23$, $p < .001$

The incremental changes in R^2 and significant F change indicate that the addition of predictors in each step results in significantly improved model fit. The F statistics show that each model achieves significant predictive ability.

Furthermore, as shown in Table 4, virtue signaling uniquely predicted consumer aggression at Step 2 ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Moral outrage ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$) and tribalism ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$) emerged as significant predictors at Step 3, supporting H2 and H3.

Table 4. Standardized Regression Weights

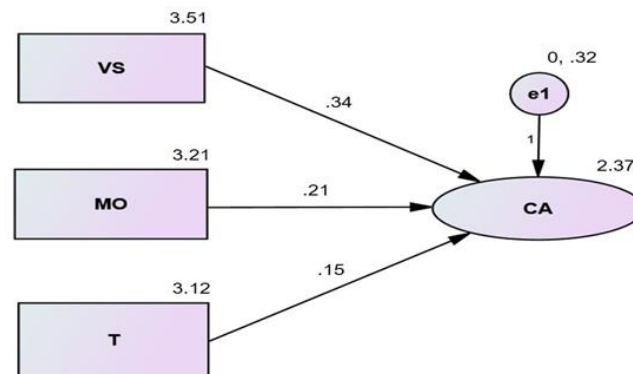
Independent Variables	β
Virtue Signaling	.34***
Moral Outrage	.21***
Tribalism	.15**

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Source: Author's analysis of survey data

The full structural model was then tested using AMOS maximum likelihood estimation. The model demonstrated good fit to the data: $\chi^2(df=4) = 23.48$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.05; TLI = 0.96; SRMR = 0.05. Figure 2 displays the path diagram generated by AMOS, visualizing the significant paths in the final model.

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Note. VS=Virtue Signaling, MO=Moral Outrage, T=Tribalism, CA= Consumer Aggression

Source: Author's analysis of structural model using AMOS 24

Figure 2. Path Diagram of the Structural Model

4.1.1. Variable Ranking

As shown in Table 4, regarding the standardized beta coefficients, virtue signaling had the greatest effect on consumer aggression ($\beta = .34$), followed by moral outrage ($\beta = .21$) and then tribalism ($\beta = .15$). This indicates that among the independent variables, consumers' desire to signal virtue had the strongest impact on the degree of aggression toward inclusive brands. Consequently, in regard to H4, the most significant variance in consumer aggression was attributed to the signaling of virtue, followed by moral outrage and finally tribalism.

Overall, the analysis using both SPSS and AMOS 24 software packages lends quantitative support to the conceptual model. While all three factors - virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism - significantly predict consumer aggression toward inclusive brands, virtue signaling appears to have the greatest explanatory power. The results suggest that consumers' motivation to demonstrate moral virtue to others most strongly drives their aggressive reactions to inclusive brands.

4.1.2. Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the reliability of scales used to measure the predictive factors in this study. Results indicated good reliability for all scales, with values ranging from 0.79 to 0.87 (see Table 5).

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*Predictors of Consumer Aggression Toward Inclusive Brands: A Mixed Methods Investigation***Table 5. Reliability Analysis**

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Consumer Aggression	18	0.87
Virtue Signaling	17	0.82
Moral Outrage	13	0.85
Tribalism	15	0.79

Source: Reliability analysis of survey data using SPSS

The internal consistency for all scales exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), indicating good reliability. Results provide support for combining scale items into composite scores for use in subsequent analyses.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using an iterative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Upon closely examining the transcripts, initial codes were developed to capture key concepts and ideas. These codes were organized into candidate themes, which were then reviewed and refined. Based on proposed themes related to consumer aggression, 20 participants exhibiting the following motivations were examined:

- Desires to signal moral virtue
"I want to show companies that discrimination won't go unpunished."
- Intense moral outrage toward inclusive brands
"Inclusive policies feel like an attack on traditional values I hold dear."
- Identification with counter-cultural tribes
"I share the same goals as other 'cancel culture' activists."

Likewise, six overarching themes emerged providing adaptive insight into the social and psychological drivers of consumer aggression towards inclusive brands. Ultimately, all the required themes were created by adapting the previous research on the subject as follows.

1. **A desire to uphold traditional values** (Graham et al., 2009; Schwartz, 1992)
"These companies are trying to force values onto people that go against traditions millions of Americans hold dear."
2. **A perception of moral decay in society** (Haidt & Graham, 2007)
"It feels like our entire culture is being corrupted by these radical agendas."
3. **Feelings of betrayal and distrust** (Rempel et al., 1985; Reimann et al., 2018)

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"Brands used to represent something good and trustworthy, but now they just want to push a political agenda."

4. **A desire for empowerment** (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Klein et al., 2004)

"I feel like speaking out and boycotting is the only power I have to fight back against these big companies."

5. **Tribal identity and belongingness** (Brewer, 1999; Mishra & Bakry, 2021; Cova & White, 2010)

"I identify with the millions of others who see what's really going on and are standing up against it."

6. **A desire to fight for freedom** (Gray, 2013; Payne, 2007)

"This is about the fight for freedom of speech and traditional American values."

The results complement the conceptual model, corroborating the predictive effects of virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism while also highlighting additional drivers of aggression like upholding values, empowerment, and freedom.

To sum up, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings provides robust support for the conceptual model and hypotheses. Results indicate that virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism - alongside desires to uphold traditions, seek empowerment, and fight for freedom - drive consumer aggression towards inclusive brands.

5. Results and Discussion

This study used the combined method to achieve concrete and more realistic results regarding the elements that trigger consumer aggression toward mainstream brands. As hypothesized, consumer aggression toward inclusive brands was positively predicted by virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism.

The survey data lent quantitative support to the proposed conceptual model, whereas the interviews provided corroborating qualitative insights. The survey found that 37% of the variance in consumer aggression was explained by the predictors. Virtue signaling had the strongest effect ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), followed by moral outrage ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$) and tribalism ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$), supporting hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 respectively. Thus, virtue signaling appeared to have the greatest impact on consumer aggression, supporting H4.

The structural model demonstrated a good fit, providing credibility to the conceptual framework depicting multiple pathways to consumer aggression. Qualitative themes mirrored the quantitative

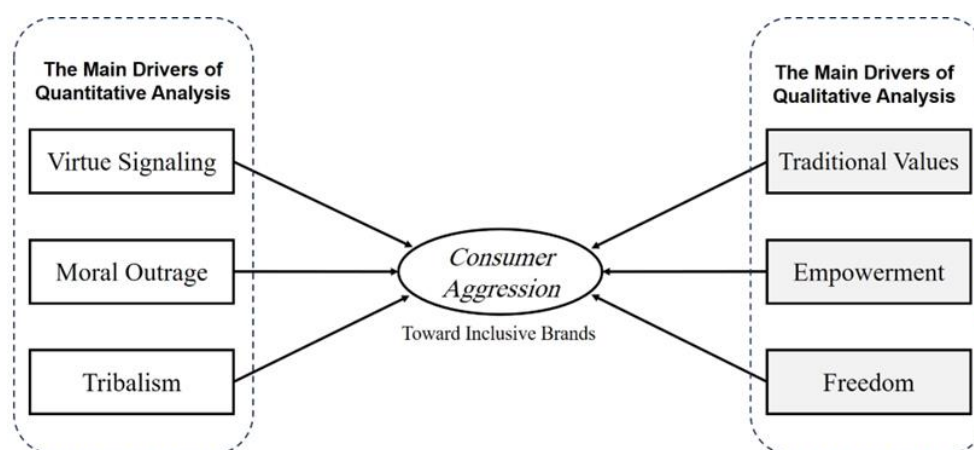
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results. Desires to signal virtue and perceptions of moral decline (Westra, 2021; Tetlock et al., 2007) indicated virtue signaling and moral outrage mechanisms.

Feelings of brand betrayal (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Reimann et al., 2018) implied moral outrage. Tribal identity and group belongingness (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Brewer, 1999) suggested tribalism effects. Additional motives centered on values (Graham et al., 2009; Schwartz, 1992), empowerment (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Klein et al., 2004), and freedom (Brehm, 1966; Gray, 2013) also emerged.

As a result, a multidimensional view of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands emerged from integrating quantitative and qualitative findings in an overarching theoretical framework (Figure 3).



Source: Author's own work (based on integrated findings from survey data and qualitative interviews)

Figure 3. Integrated Model of Drivers of Consumer Aggression Towards Inclusive Brands

Figure 3 positions quantitative factors representing more cognitive and evaluative drivers as distal antecedents of consumer aggression. In contrast, qualitative themes reflect more affective and identity-based motivations that exert a more proximate influence. This integrated framework consolidates disparate drivers identified via the two methods.

Together, the findings illuminate complex psychological, emotional, and social processes underlying consumer aggression (Penaloza & Price, 1993). While virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism motivate aggression as posited, additional motives rooted in values, empowerment, and freedom also drive responses. Combating aggression requires recognizing its multidimensionality and addressing consumer needs in inclusive, empowering ways (Osburg, 2017; Munro, 2020).

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Brands combating consumer aggression must adopt holistic, humanizing approaches that validate consumers' moral values and incentivize inclusive dialogue rather than defensiveness or boycotts (Gruen et al., 2006). Accordingly, brands should seek to foster consumer empowerment in ways that promote ethical sharing of diverse perspectives and collective progress.

To recapitulate, virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism predicted consumer aggression as hypothesized yet only partially explained the phenomenon. Additional motivations centered on upholding values, seeking empowerment, and fighting for freedom also emerged. A multidimensional view of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands illuminates opportunities for brands to foster inclusion through ethical communication, dialogic engagement, and consumer empowerment initiatives.

6. Research Limitations

Several limitations of the present study point to avenues for meaningful extensions in the forthcoming research on consumer behavior. Fundamentally, limitations stem from the narrow scope adopted to investigate consumer reactions to inclusive brands.

First, the focus on U.S. consumers limits generalizability. Inclusivity initiatives and consumer reactions vary across cultures, suggesting cross-cultural comparisons would yield valuable insights (de Mooij & Beniflah, 2015). For example, individualistic tendencies may amplify virtue signaling motives in the U.S., while collectivist orientations could diminish such motives elsewhere (Lim et al., 2021). Examining cultural differences could offer a more nuanced understanding of predictors of consumer aggression.

Second, the qualitative component utilized a small interview sample. Larger, more diverse qualitative samples employing different methods like focus groups could generate additional themes and motivations for consumer aggression (Meehan et al., 2006). For example, interviews may overrepresent more extreme, activist consumers; focus groups could incorporate more moderate voices. A deeper qualitative inquiry is needed.

Third, the cross-sectional design precludes drawing causal inferences regarding predictors of consumer aggression. Longitudinal and experimental studies manipulating predictors could establish causality and directionality (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). For example, experiments exposing consumers to virtue signaling cues or moral outrage primes before measuring aggression could provide stronger evidence for causal effects.

Fourth, the range of predictors examined was limited. Additional individual difference variables like political orientation, dogmatism and moral foundations could illuminate what

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consumer traits most strongly predispose aggression (Haidt, 2012a; Haidt, 2012b). Psychological mechanisms like reactance and anti-conformity might also mediate relationships between predictors and aggression (Shen et al., 2019). Broader, multilevel models are needed.

Fifth, the study focused narrowly on consumer aggression as an outcome. Future research should expand to consider constructive, civil responses to inclusive brands as well (Osburg, 2013). For example, predictors of willingness to engage in respectful dialogue and compromise might differ from those predicting aggression. Comparing predictors of constructive versus destructive reactions could offer practical insights.

To summarize, many opportunities exist to extend this nascent research domain. Cross-cultural, qualitative, longitudinal, experimental and multilevel studies incorporating broader predictors and outcomes could generate a more robust understanding. Research progressing from reactive consumer aggression toward proactive consumer empowerment and engagement holds promise for moving social discourse forward in productive ways.

Future research directions could include:

- Cross-cultural comparisons of predictors of consumer aggression and engagement
- Qualitative studies employing diverse methods to generate a richer theoretical framework
- Longitudinal and experimental research establishing causal relationships between predictors and aggression/engagement
- Multilevel models incorporating psychological, demographic and brand-related predictors at individual and group levels
- Comparing predictors of aggression versus constructive engagement to inform brand communication and stakeholder management strategies
- Moving beyond a focus on aggressive consumer reactions towards more empowering, engagement-oriented research aiming to improve social discourse and promote inclusivity.

Overall, adopting a multidimensional, multidisciplinary lens that integrates cultural, psychological, social, and communication perspectives offers the greatest potential to advance understanding of - and ultimately reduce - consumer aggression toward inclusive brands while fostering constructive dialogue, stakeholder satisfaction and impactful inclusivity efforts.

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7. Conclusion

This mixed methods study makes several important contributions to understanding the complex phenomenon of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands. By integrating virtue signaling theory, moral outrage theory, and social identity theory into a unified conceptual framework, the research identifies multiple pathways leading to aggressive consumer reactions against brands embracing progressive agendas.

The results provide empirical support for the hypothesized model, with virtue signaling, moral outrage, and tribalism all positively predicting consumer aggression. This lends credence to the notion that individual desires to signal moral virtue, anger in response to perceived moral violations, and ingroup favoritism rooted in social identity each contribute to generating aggression. Of the predictors, virtue signaling exhibited the strongest effect, highlighting the role of moral grandstanding and 'outrage competitions' in driving aggressive responses.

At the same time, the qualitative findings reveal additional nuances beyond the conceptual model. Consumer aggression appears motivated not just by desire for status, outrage over betrayal, and ingroup loyalty, but also by perceived threats to traditional values, feelings of empowerment through protest, and defense of cherished freedoms. This points to the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon.

Integrating the quantitative and qualitative results provides a more complete understanding of the complex psychosocial drivers of consumer aggression toward inclusive brands. Rather than stemming from any single factor, aggression appears to arise through an intersection of individual, social, cultural and psychological mechanisms. Addressing this complexity requires nuanced engagement strategies that validate diverse consumer perspectives, foster empowerment and dialogue, and incentivize constructive participation over hostility and division.

While illuminating these dynamics, the study has limitations that provide exciting opportunities for future research. Cross-cultural comparisons expanded qualitative samples, longitudinal and experimental designs, and multilevel modeling incorporating additional predictors could further enrich the understanding of consumer aggression and engagement. Ultimately, progressing from reactive aggression to proactive empowerment and unity may hold the greatest promise for brands seeking to lead social progress through inclusion.

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8. Theoretical Implications

The study offers several theoretical implications. First, it demonstrates the value of integrating complimentary yet distinct perspectives - including virtue signaling theory, moral outrage theory, and social identity theory - to more comprehensively explain complex consumer behaviors. Such multifaceted theoretical lenses can reveal nuances that single theories may miss.

Second, the results suggest that individual psychological motives, social identity processes, and group dynamics all contribute to consumer aggression. Future research should employ multi-level theories that situate individual motivations within broader group contexts to more fully capture this phenomenon.

Third, the emergence of additional motivations beyond those hypothesized indicates the need for an even broader theoretical framework. Future research should develop integrative frameworks that incorporate motives related to values, empowerment, and freedom alongside virtue signaling, outrage and tribalism.

Fourth, the study highlights the multidimensionality of consumer aggression, indicating that single theories may only partially explain its origins. More nuanced, pluralistic theoretical perspectives that recognize multiple predictive pathways are likely needed.

Finally, the research points to the value of mixed methods approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data to generate rich, contextualized understandings of complex consumer behaviors. Integrating multiple research lenses can lead to more comprehensive, actionable theorizing.

9. Practical Implications

The study provides multiple action-driven insights with tangible strategic value for brands pursuing inclusive initiatives and diverse stances, particularly regarding:

- Brands should carefully craft their inclusive stances to avoid triggering moral outrage. Communicating values and agendas in an ethical, respectful and sensitive manner can minimize virtue signaling and accusations of betrayal from stakeholders.
- Building longitudinal relationships with stakeholders founded on transparency, authenticity and two-way communication is imperative. Such dialogic engagement practices can mitigate virtue signaling and tribal hostility that often impede the success of inclusion efforts.

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- Providing opportunities for stakeholders to autonomously and constructively participate in brand initiatives in inclusive ways can fulfill needs for values expression, empowerment and autonomy. When stakeholders feel meaningfully involved, aggressive reactions may decrease.
- Tailored stakeholder management strategies that recognize the multiplicity of underlying motives - including values concerns, moral outrage and group loyalty - are crucial. Individualized communication and initiatives have greater potential to effectively address each stakeholder's motivations.
- Emphasizing common humanity, shared values and potential for mutual understanding over differences is more conducive to constructive debate and revision of inclusion initiatives. Highlighting commonalities can encourage stakeholders to productively discuss tensions rather than aggress against brands.

Ultimately, a commitment to maximizing social impact and broadening inclusion, not profits, helps alleviate aggressive consumer reactions. When inclusive brands prioritize these higher purposes to guide their actions authentically, stakeholders are more likely to respond constructively.

Collectively, these recommendations point to the promise of an empowerment-based, multidimensional approach that acknowledges diverse stakeholder perspectives yet aims to resolve tensions through civil exchange. Inclusive brands that develop nuanced, ethical communication strategies founded on empathy, transparency and authentic values-driven leadership may experience fewer aggressive consumer reactions over time

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