

# ARTICLES

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF BRAND ATTACHMENT FOR ADHERENCE TO CAUSES OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

*A importância do apego à marca para o engajamento em causas de responsabilidade social corporativa*

*La importancia del apego de marca para la adhesión a causas de responsabilidad social corporativa*

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the joint effects of brand-cause congruence, brand attachment, and attitude toward a cause of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on consumers' intention to adhere to causes sponsored by a brand. The results of two experiments indicate that when consumers' attitude toward such causes is less positive and brand attachment is low, the intention to adhere to a CSR cause is greater when the brand is congruent to the cause than when it is incongruent. If consumer brand attachment is high, the intention to adhere to the cause is also high, regardless of brand-cause congruence. However, if consumer attitude toward the cause is more positive, brand attachment does not moderate the effect of brand-cause congruence on the intention to adhere to the cause. The perception of persuasive intent mediates the influence of brand-cause congruence on the intention to adhere for consumers with low brand attachment, but not for those with high brand attachment.

**KEYWORDS** | Corporate social responsibility, brand attachment, attitude toward the cause, brand-cause congruence, experiment.

### RESUMO

*Este estudo examina o efeito conjunto da congruência marca-causa, do apego à marca e da atitude em relação à causa de Responsabilidade Social Corporativa (RSC) sobre a intenção dos consumidores de se engajarem em causas de RSC patrocinadas por uma marca. Os resultados de dois experimentos sugerem que, quando a atitude do consumidor em relação à causa é menos positiva e o apego do consumidor à marca é baixo, a intenção de aderir à causa de RSC é maior quando a causa é congruente com a marca do que quando a causa é incongruente com a marca; se o apego do consumidor é alto, a intenção de aderir à causa não depende da congruência marca-causa. Por outro lado, se a atitude do consumidor em relação à causa é mais positiva, o apego à marca não modera o efeito da congruência sobre a intenção de aderir à causa. A percepção de intenção persuasiva mediou a influência da congruência marca-causa sobre a intenção de aderir para pessoas de baixo apego à marca, mas não para pessoas de alto apego à marca.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** | Responsabilidade social corporativa, apego à marca, atitude em relação à causa, congruência marca-causa, experimento.

### RESUMEN

*Este estudio analiza el efecto combinado de la congruencia marca-causa, del apego a la marca y de la actitud hacia la causa de Responsabilidad Social Corporativa (RSC) sobre la intención de los consumidores de adherir a causas de RSC patrocinadas por una marca. Dos experimentos sugieren que cuando la actitud del consumidor hacia la causa es menos positiva y el apego es bajo, la intención de adherir a la causa es más alta cuando esta es congruente con la marca que cuando es incongruente. Si el apego es alto, la intención de adherir no depende de la congruencia marca-causa. Por otro lado, si la actitud del consumidor hacia la causa es más positiva, el apego no modera el efecto de la congruencia marca-causa sobre la intención de adherir. En el caso de las personas con bajo apego, la percepción del intento persuasivo medió la influencia de la congruencia marca-causa sobre la intención de adherir. Esto no se observó entre las personas con alto apego.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE** | Responsabilidad social corporativa, apego a la marca, actitud en relación a la causa, congruencia marca-causa, experimento.

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## INTRODUCTION

Issues such as social inequality, urban violence, environmental disasters, and educational deficits have been appearing increasingly in national debates, stimulating companies to assume more relevant roles to solve these problems. Social responsibility actions contribute to both companies (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001) and to the social issue at the core of such efforts. Sponsoring corporate social responsibility (CSR) actions positively affects intentions to purchase (Andrews, Luo, Fang, & Aspara, 2014; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) and invest in the company (Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006), attitude toward the company (Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010), and positive word-of-mouth (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

Although companies' benefits from CSR actions are well documented, the same cannot be said about consumers' intention to contribute to the cause. Identifying consumers with company's CSR actions may increase their will to engage, triggering positive effects for both the brand and the beneficiaries of the cause.

Despite their positive aspects, CSR actions can negatively affect the brand and consumer adherence (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). According to Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos and Avramidis (2009), consumers may not perceive the reciprocity of CSR actions. They may consider companies' adherence to such practices as having opportunistic motivations and perceive these practices as deliberate attempts to mislead them about the companies' ethical capacity (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

Congruence between brand and CSR action—degree to which a brand and social cause share the same values or consumer base (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001)—is essential for a brand to achieve positive results in response to cause marketing campaigns (Roy, 2010; Zdravkovic et al., 2010). However, other studies (Nan & Heo, 2007; Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011) suggest that the negative effects of low brand-cause congruence can be mitigated. One question has not been adequately answered: whether a strong affective relationship between the consumer and brands associated with a social cause or a very positive consumer attitude toward such sponsored initiative, can reduce negative impacts of low brand-cause congruence.

He, Zhu, Gouran and Kolo (2016) showed that attachment, which reflects consumers' emotional bond with a brand, positively influences intention to purchase from brands sponsoring social causes. Brand attachment is an important indicator of brand identification, promoting consumer loyalty and commitment (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). However, brand

attachment's effect under low brand-cause congruence has not been examined empirically yet.

Conversely, Barone, Norman, and Miyazaki (2007) suggested that a more positive attitude toward the social cause can mitigate the negative effect of low brand-cause congruence. However, it is unclear whether a positive attitude toward the cause can mitigate the effect of low brand attachment in conditions of low brand-cause congruence.

Several studies suggested that low brand-cause congruence leads consumers to suspect brand motivation, but few studies examined the mechanisms through which brand-cause congruence influences responses to social issue at the core of the CSR efforts (however, see exceptions such as Romani & Grappi, 2014; Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2014). In this study, we propose that the perception of manipulative intent—the degree to which consumers perceive that an advertising campaign is attempting to unfairly persuade them (Campbell, 1995)—mitigates the positive effects of sponsoring a social cause. This proposal is consistent with the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which states that consumers develop knowledge of the persuasive tactics that companies use. The consumer's knowledge of persuasive intent increases consumers' skepticism about advertisements (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998) and negatively influences their behavioral responses.

This study contributes to CSR literature by examining three variables that determine the results of sponsoring a CSR action—brand-cause congruence, brand attachment, and attitude toward the CSR cause. Although previous studies have examined these variables separately, joint analysis of important variables increases the knowledge about certain phenomena of interest, such as sponsorship of CSR actions. The study also contributes to the literature by examining the effect of sponsoring CSR actions on a variable of social interest—intention to adhere to a cause. Finally, the study contributes to the CSR theory by examining the mechanism through which brand-cause congruence influences the results of sponsoring CSR actions.

From a managerial perspective, this study suggests to companies the conditions under which brand-cause congruence is more or less important, serving as a guide to select causes that brands should support, and the results that they could expect.

In the following sections, we discuss the concepts involved in hypothesis formulation and present two studies that tested these hypotheses. We conclude with theoretical and managerial implications, present the study's limitations, and give suggestions for future studies.

## CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Mohr et al. (2001) defined CSR as “a company’s commitment to minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing its long-run beneficial impact on society” (p. 47). A company’s adherence to these initiatives is attractive, since it appears positively related to its financial performance (Stanwick & Stanwick, 1998) and to consumers’ attitudes and intentions to purchase from (Andrews et al., 2014; Mohr et al., 2001) and invest in the company (Sen et al., 2006).

Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) suggested that individuals tend to identify with brands engaging in CSR because of their need to maintain a consistent and positive self-image. However, they also stated that the relationship between promoting CSR actions and individuals’ behavioral responses vary according to personal support for CSR issues, beliefs, and perceived congruence between individuals’ and the brand’s characteristics. Moreover, when the CSR cause has high brand congruence, consumers’ attitudes toward the brand are more favorable (Nan & Heo, 2007; Roy, 2010). A brand may have greater congruence with a cause if both serve a similar consumer base or have similar values.

Most studies on CSR, however, focused more on the financial returns that these initiatives can bring to the company’s business and much less on their potential social returns (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). For example, Romani and Grappi (2014) reported that seeing the promotion of good company actions can increase individuals’ probability to engage in similar sustainable behavior.

Maignan and Ferrell (2004) proposed a framework for integrating CSR actions into organizations’ marketing activities. They suggested that many studies did not adequately consider how marketing practices and thinking contribute to the development of socially responsible practices in organizations. They also criticized marketing studies examining consumer responses to CSR actions using limited dimensions and response measurements related exclusively to marketing performance. In this study, along with considering consumers’ responses to different CSR dimensions, we examined a variable that has not received much attention in the current literature—consumers’ intention to adhere to a brand-supported cause.

## BRAND ATTACHMENT

The recognition of the importance of building strong relationships between consumers and brands raised the interest in studying brand attachment. Brand attachment influences the building of

strong brand relationships, increasing consumers’ loyalty, and decreasing price sensitivity (Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2008). Brand attachment can be defined as “the strength of the cognitive and emotional bond connecting the brand with the self,” and it “denotes a psychological state of mind in which [...] the brand is viewed as an extension of the self” (Park et al., 2008, p. 4).

Brand attachment is an important moderator of consumers’ responses to CSR actions because high attachment makes consumers more sensitive and less critical to brands’ activities (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). According to He et al. (2016), the emotional brand attachment is positively related to individuals’ intention to purchase products from brands sponsoring CSR campaigns, due to brands’ socially responsible image and the need to strengthen individuals’ moral identity. As discussed in the next section, brand attachment can make consumers respond positively to CSR actions regardless of low brand-cause congruence.

## BRAND ATTACHMENT EFFECT ON CSR BRAND-CAUSE CONGRUENCE

Roy (2010) observed that low congruence between CSR actions and brands is perceived negatively, and, when congruence is high, the perception of sincerity and attitude toward the brand are more positive. Similarly, Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) reported that low brand-cause congruence can negatively influence consumers’ beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, regardless of the sponsoring company’s motivation.

Despite these studies’ results, there are still questions about what could be expected in low congruence and high attachment contexts. There is theoretical evidence that consumers’ awareness of the cause, company’s credibility, attitude toward the cause, and communication content can mitigate the effects of low congruence (Barone et al., 2007; Nan & Heo, 2007).

Regarding “secondary” effects of CSR actions, Kwak and Kwon (2016) suggested that consumers’ identification with a company enhances their self-perception of being involved in the donation process, evoking feelings of gratitude and encouraging them to collaborate with such initiatives. The greater the consumer-company identification, the greater the feeling of gratitude and intention to support the actions. Sen, Johnson, Bhattacharya and Wang (2015) also provided evidence that high brand attachment is positively related to individuals’ intention to adhere to CSR actions, regardless of brand-cause congruence.

Consumers with high brand attachment may demonstrate a biased assimilation process and tendency to view events that

agree with their own perspective as being more reliable (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). In practice, such assimilative bias would lead consumers to forget brands' "mistakes" (McCullough et al., 1998) and engage in biased and defensive processing of brand-related negative information (Schmalz & Orth, 2012).

We propose that high brand attachment may moderate the effect of brand-cause congruence on consumers' responses. Specifically, it may make individuals to decrease low brand-cause congruence relevance, inhibiting their suspicion of brand motivation even if companies decide to sponsor low-congruence causes. Conversely, individuals with low brand attachment only respond positively when the brand is congruent with the cause. That is, we propose that high brand attachment can mitigate the negative effect of brand-cause incongruity, leading to the following hypotheses:

$H_{1a}$ : For consumers with low brand attachment, the intention to adhere to a CSR action is greater (lower) when the cause is congruent (incongruent) with the brand.

$H_{1b}$ : For consumers with high brand attachment, the intention to adhere to a CSR action does not depend on brand-cause congruence.

## THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PERSUASIVE INTENT

People are constantly exposed to situations wherein they must deal with marketing messages and actions that use different appeals to convince them to purchase or use products and services. Exposure to these appeals yields knowledge of persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which individuals use to interpret and evaluate such messages.

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) suggested that knowledge of persuasion tactics increases skepticism about advertisements, which reduces the likelihood of positive responses to company-related causes (Lawler & Thye, 2006). Romani et al. (2014) suggested that persuading consumers to believe CSR actions are impartial and unselfish is essential to produce positive responses, since perception of opportunistic motivations may lead consumers to doubt the brand's efforts. Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013) observed that consumers become more resistant to positive information and prone to negative word-of-mouth when they doubt the brand's reasons for adhering to CSR actions.

Mohr et al. (2001) found that people believe part of the company's motivation to act in a socially responsible manner is the interest in helping, but they can notice that companies

also have their own interests. Chiou, Hsu, and Hsieh (2013) investigated the relationship between brand attachment and persuasive intent perception. They found that, for high attachment levels, there is a tendency to deny negative brand information, as individuals are less likely to be influenced negatively by suspicions or accusations not aligning with their beliefs about the brand.

Thus, we propose that people with high brand attachment are less sensitive to noticing persuasive intent in CSR actions, regardless of brand-cause congruence. In turn, people with low brand attachment are more sensitive to brands' persuasive intent and can notice manipulative intent in low congruence actions. Formally, we propose the following hypothesis:

$H_2$ : For consumers with low brand attachment, the perception of persuasive intent mediates the effect of brand-cause congruence on the intention to adhere to a cause. This does not occur for people with high brand attachment.

## EXPERIMENT 1

In this experiment, we investigate the moderating effect of brand attachment on the relationship between brand-cause congruence and individuals' intention to adhere to a CSR action ( $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ ). We also investigate the mediating effect of persuasive intent for people with low brand attachment, but not for people with high brand attachment ( $H_2$ ).

### Method

#### Sample and design

Undergraduate students ( $n = 131$ , 59% males,  $M_{age} = 21$  years) were invited to participate in a between-subjects (brand-cause congruence: congruent vs. incongruent) laboratory experiment in which brand attachment was measured. Participants were approached during class breaks and invited to respond to a survey in a laboratory. Upon accessing the questionnaire, the computer program randomly allocated experimental conditions to the participants.

#### Pretesting

A pretest was conducted to select one brand and two CSR actions, one congruent and one incongruent with the brand. Pretest participants ( $n = 31$ ) were drawn from the same population of the main study. Initially, each individual was exposed to 11 CSR

actions and asked to indicate two with which they identified the most; then, they were asked to indicate the brand they considered more appropriate to perform the 11 CSR actions. The 37 brands presented were selected based on the researchers' judgment about the congruence between the brands and investigated causes.

Collective recycling was mentioned the most (15 mentions; 48% of respondents) and was chosen as the experiment stimulus. Coca-Cola was the brand most associated with collective recycling, mentioned by 21 respondents, and was also chosen as a stimulus. Based on our judgment, we selected a CSR action incongruent with the Coca-Cola brand (skin cancer prevention).

## Procedures

At the experiment's outset, participants were informed that Coca-Cola was testing a new advertisement for a CSR action before a broad national launch. After exposure to one of the advertisements, participants indicated their intention to adhere to the campaign ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ), agreeing or disagreeing (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree) with three affirmations adapted from Romani et al. (2014) ("This advertisement positively influenced my opinion about collective recycling"; "My willingness to cooperate with or adhere to collective recycling increased after seeing this advertisement"; and "This advertisement encouraged me to seek information about collective recycling").

The perception of persuasive intent was measured using the inferences of manipulative intent scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) proposed by Campbell (1995). To measure brand-cause congruence, we adapted the scale used by Keller and Aaker (1992) and Smith and Park (1992) ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) into seven-point Likert-type scales.

Finally, participants indicated the extent to which the brand elicited a set of 10 feelings (joyful, happy, satisfied, relaxed, inspired, motivated, interested, active, enthusiastic, and calm) using a seven-point scale (1 = nothing; 7 = very much). These items were adapted from Thomson, MacInnis, and Park (2005) and grouped into an index ( $\alpha = .93$ ,  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) to represent brand attachment. After completing these measurements, participants answered demographic questions and were thanked for their participation.

## Results

### Manipulation check

As expected, the perceived congruence between Coca-Cola's brand and the CSR action "collective recycling" ( $M = 5.6$ ) was

greater than the perceived congruence between Coca-Cola and the CSR action "skin cancer prevention" ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $t(129) = 10.7$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which means that manipulation of brand-cause congruence worked as expected.

### Intention to adhere to the campaign

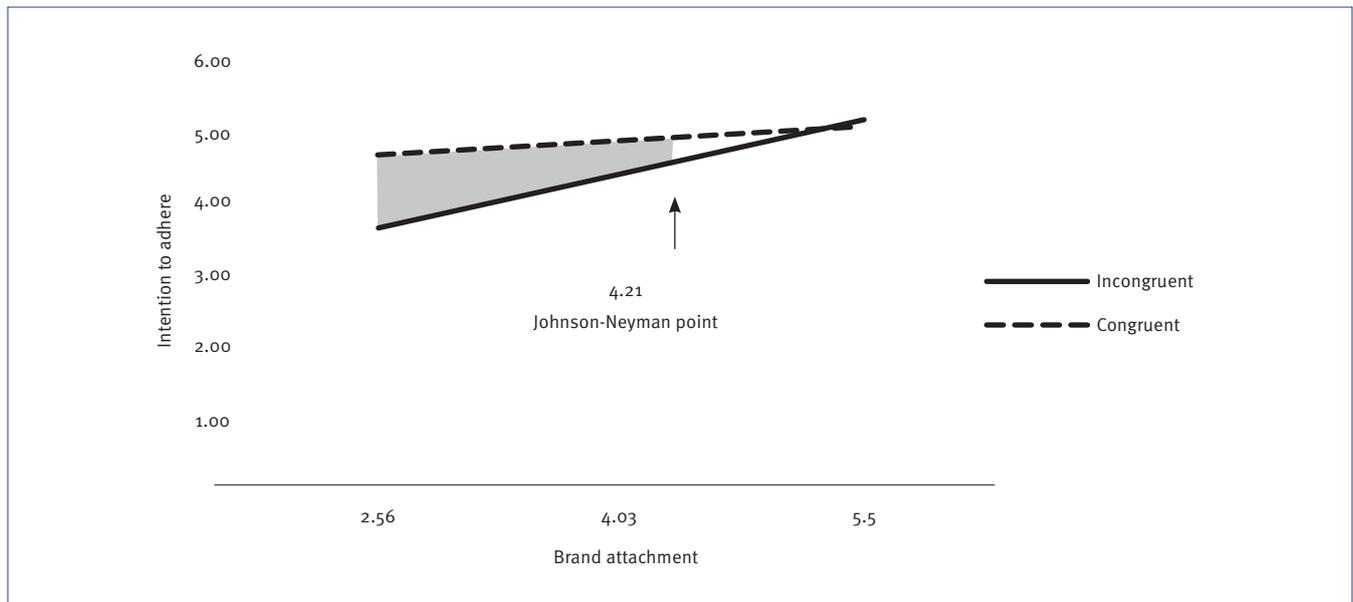
The effect of brand-cause congruence on the intention to adhere to the CSR action moderated by brand attachment ( $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ ) was analyzed using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 1) with 10,000 bootstraps resamples. The procedure used intention to adhere as dependent, brand attachment as moderator, and brand-cause congruence as independent (0 = incongruent, 1 = congruent) variables.

The results showed that the regression is significant ( $F(3, 127) = 13.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.24$ ). For the sample of 131 respondents, *post-hoc* calculation of the power of the *t*-test regression interaction coefficient using G-Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) exceeded 99.9%. The interaction term's coefficient was significant ( $b = -0.38$ ,  $t(127) = -2.98$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which confirms the hypothesis of moderation. To decompose this interaction, we used the Johnson-Neyman technique to identify the range of brand attachment to which the effect of campaign congruence was significant (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch, & McClelland, 2013). When brand attachment assumed values below 4.21, corresponding to 49% of the sample, there was a significant and positive effect ( $b = 0.37$ ,  $SD = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) of congruence on intention to adhere to the CSR action. Confirming  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ , for low attachment level (below 4.21), intention to adhere to the CSR campaign was greater for the congruent campaign than for the incongruent campaign. For high brand attachment (above 4.21), we did not find a significant difference in the intention to adhere according to brand-cause congruence (Graph 1).

### Mediating effect of persuasive intent

Subsequently, we analyzed the moderated mediation to test  $H_2$ . We used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 8), considering 95% confidence intervals generated with 10,000 resamples. As predicted, we found a significant and positive indirect conditional effect of persuasive intent ( $b = 2.56$  [.03; .51]) for low but not for high brand attachment ( $b = -.02$  [-.18; .10]). These results show that, for people with low brand attachment, lower intention to adhere to the incongruent CSR action than the congruent one is triggered by the greater perception of persuasive intent. However, people with high brand attachment are immune to the campaign's persuasive intent, resulting in no difference between intentions to adhere to the two campaigns, confirming  $H_2$ .

Graph 1. Intention to adhere to the cause by congruence and level of brand attachment



## Discussion

Results of the first experiment suggest that the negative effect of brand-cause incongruence on intention to adhere to the CSR action was only significant for people with low brand attachment. Kwak and Kwon (2016) had reported that CSR actions encourage consumers who identify with the organization to support the cause, inspiring feelings of gratitude that motivate the intention to donate/support the action. If we extend the results obtained for brand attachment in the first experiment to identification with the organization, our results suggest that only individuals with high identification with the CSR action promoting company will likely contribute to the cause.

Studies on brand attachment reported that people seem to perceive fewer negative motivations associated with CSR actions promoted by brands to which they are more attached (Chiou et al., 2013; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Results of the first experiment are consistent with these studies and suggest that individuals with low brand attachment perceived higher persuasive intent in CSR actions that were incongruent with the brand, reducing their intention to adhere. People with high brand attachment, however, did not report differences in the perception of persuasive intent and demonstrated the same intention to adhere to the cause, regardless of brand-cause congruence.

Although brand attachment is idiosyncratic and not under direct control of brand managers, it is based on feelings of security built up during the relationship between the individual and the brand (Sen et al., 2015). This security is the result of the history between the individual and brand and seems to make consumers

immune to the perception of opportunistic motivations and, therefore, more willing to support actions promoted by the brand.

## EXPERIMENT 2

According to Drumwright (1996), consumer-cause congruence is as important as, or even more important than, brand-cause congruence. When consumer-cause congruence is low, individuals are less interested in adhering to the cause. Grau and Folsle (2007) showed that more involved individuals demonstrated more favorable attitudes toward CSR actions. The attitudes of less involved individuals were improved only when the action sponsored local rather than national causes. Similarly, Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig (2004) observed that the cause's relevance to individuals influences their decision to buy branded products associated with CSR. Zdravkovic et al. (2010) reported that consumers' familiarity with the cause significantly influences their attitude toward the brand when there is brand-cause congruence, but not when they are incongruent.

Extending such conclusions, Barone et al. (2007) showed that the attitude toward the cause may also influence the effect of congruence between the cause and brand in determining consumer responses. When individuals have positive attitudes toward the cause, congruence becomes less relevant because there is an interaction between the consumer's affinity with the cause and perception of the company's motivations to promote the action. Sheikh and Beise-Zee (2011, p. 27) also investigated

the relationship between brand-cause congruence and affinity with the cause and attitude toward the promoting company. They observed that brand-cause congruence significantly affects individuals' attitude when affinity is low, but the effect is insignificant when affinity is high.

However, the abovementioned studies investigated only the effects of individuals' attitude toward the cause on the returns of CSR actions to the company, but not specifically toward the cause. Kwak and Kwon (2016) observed that, in addition to the identification between consumer and company, the attitude toward the cause also positively influences the intention to donate. The more positive the attitude toward the cause, the stronger the gratitude-donation relationship, and, consequently, the greater the individuals' intention to donate.

Results from previous studies suggest that more positive attitudes toward the CSR cause lead to more positive consumer responses toward the brand, even when brand-cause congruence is low. However, attitude toward the cause may influence individuals' intention to adhere (Kwak & Kwon, 2016). We propose that more favorable attitudes toward the cause may mitigate the effect of low brand attachment and low brand-cause congruence. This means that, regardless of brand attachment and brand-cause congruence, when the attitude toward the CSR cause is high, intention to adhere to the CSR cause will be high. However, when attitudes toward the cause are not so positive, the results observed in the first experiment should be maintained. That is, brand attachment will moderate the effect of brand-cause congruence on the intention to adhere to the cause. This debate leads to the following hypotheses:

$H_{3a}$ : The predicted effect on  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$  is maintained when the consumer has a low attitude toward the promoted CSR cause.

$H_{3b}$ : The intention to adhere to the CSR action does not depend on brand-cause congruence or brand attachment when the attitude toward the promoted CSR cause is high.

## Method

### Sample and design

Undergraduate students ( $n = 280$ , 61% males,  $M_{age} = 21.5$  years) were invited to participate in a 2 (brand-cause congruence: congruent vs. incongruent)  $\times$  2 (Coca-Cola vs. Dove) between-subjects laboratory experiment in which brand attachment and attitude toward the CSR cause were measured. To increase the generalizability of the study, we made two replications with

two different brands (Dove and Coca-Cola) and maintained CSR actions in such a way that a CSR action was congruent with one of the brands and incongruent with the other one. Therefore, we expected the same results for each brand. In contrast with previous studies, wherein replications were made by asking participants to evaluate several CSR actions (e.g., Zdravkovic et al., 2010), we chose to expose each individual to a single brand-cause stimulus to reduce the cognitive load of performing many evaluations. Instead of varying each brand's actions, we preferred to keep them constant to show that the results observed in the first experiment are not specific to an appropriate brand-cause choice and are replicable regardless the brand or the cause.

### Procedures

We maintained the Coca-Cola brand and the collective recycling cause to represent the congruent brand-cause (stimuli used in the first experiment). Moreover, for greater generalization, we replaced the "skin cancer prevention" cause of the first experiment by "breast cancer prevention" to represent an action incongruent with the Coca-Cola brand. Based on pretest results from the first experiment, we chose the Dove brand because it was the most mentioned as more appropriate to support the "breast cancer prevention" action (16 mentions; 52% of respondents) among the five brands available. When we made these choices, we expected the Coca-Cola (Dove) brand to be congruent (incongruent) with the collective recycling action and incongruent (congruent) with the breast cancer prevention action.

The stimuli—advertisements to be supposedly published in magazines—were created using the same layout, design, colors, background, and font, and similar sentences.

Participants responded to the same scales used in the first experiment adapted to this experiment, except for the brand attachment scale. We used the Park et al. (2010) brand attachment scale, answered through a seven-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree). Moreover, participants were asked to evaluate their attitude toward the CSR cause using five items of the scale proposed by Webb, Green, and Brashear (2000). After completing these measurements, participants answered demographic questions and were thanked for their participation.

## Results

### Manipulation check

After grouping questions related to brand-cause congruence ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ), we verified that the perceived

congruence between the Coca-Cola brand and the collective recycling campaign ( $M = 5.6$ ) was greater than the congruence between the Coca-Cola brand and the breast cancer cause ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $t(138) = -8.82$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, the perceived congruence between the Dove brand and the breast cancer cause ( $M = 5.5$ ) was greater than the congruence between the Dove brand and the collective recycling cause ( $M = 4.4$ ;  $t(138) = -8.66$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, manipulation of the congruence between actions and brands worked as expected.

### Intention to adhere to the campaign

To verify whether the results were the same for each of the two replications, we performed a regression analysis using the intention to adhere to the cause as a dependent variable, and the dummy variable corresponding to the brands and CSR causes, brand attachment, attitude toward the cause, and all interactions among the four variables as independent variables. The regression was significant ( $F(15,264) = 6.81$  ( $p < 0.01$ );  $R^2 = 0.24$ ), but neither the coefficient associated with the dummy variable corresponding to the brands nor any of the interactions with this dummy variable were significant ( $p > 0.30$  in all cases). This means that, as expected, the brand did not interact with any of the variables. Therefore, we could pool the data of the two brands to test the hypotheses.

To test hypotheses  $H_{3a}$  and  $H_{3b}$ , we used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 3). The procedure used the intention to adhere as dependent, brand attachment and attitude toward the cause as moderator, and campaign congruence (0 = incongruent, 1 = congruent) as independent variables. As expected, the results showed that the coefficient of the term associated with the interaction among the three variables was significant ( $b = 0.21$ ,  $t(272) = 2.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

For the sample of 280 respondents, *post-hoc* calculation of the power of the *t*-test interaction coefficient using the G-Power software (Faul et al., 2007) exceeded 99.9%.

To decompose the interaction among the three variables and facilitate the interpretation according to the hypotheses, two separate analyses were done, one for low and another for high attitude toward the CSR cause ( $H_{3a}$  and  $H_{3b}$ , respectively). Once the variable attitude toward the cause was measured, the two groups were divided by the median ( $Med = 5.8$ ). We analyzed all values in the attitude toward the cause scale using the same procedure used in Experiment 1 and the results were the same as those obtained by dichotomizing attitude toward the cause. However, in benefit to the readability of the manuscript, we

decided to present only the results obtained by dichotomization of the variable attitude toward the cause.

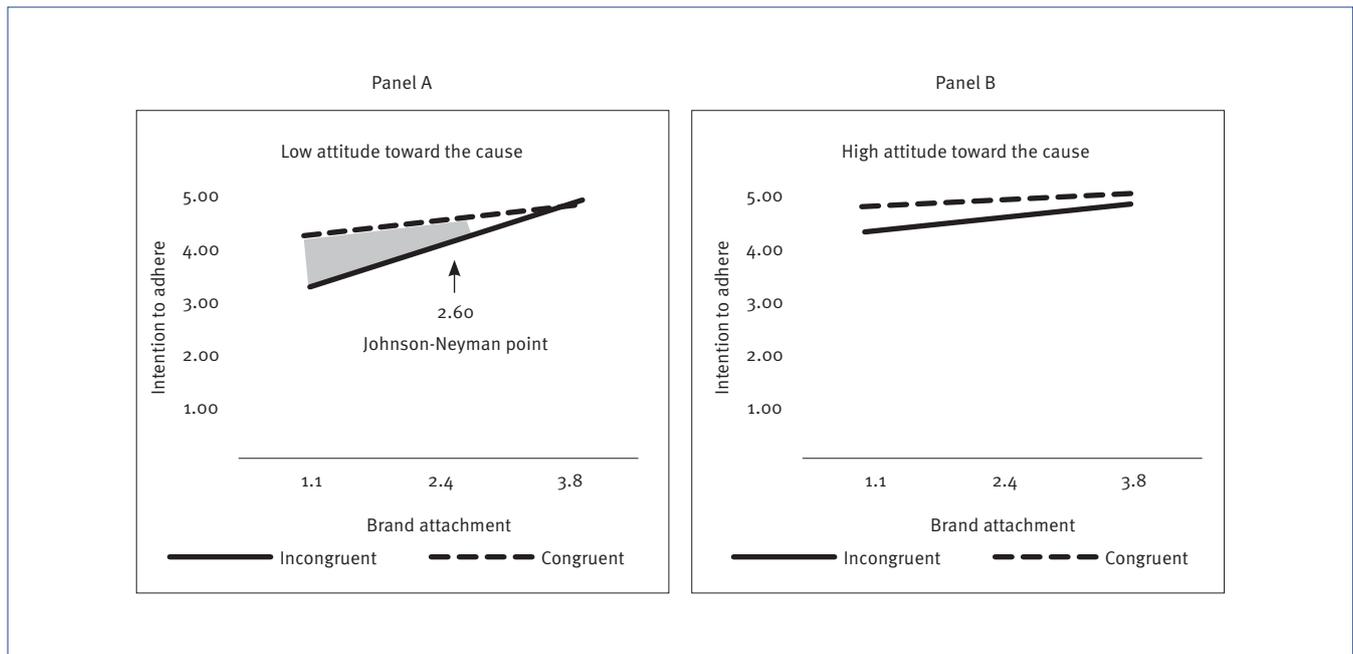
For individuals with low levels of attitude toward the cause, an analysis similar to the one used in the first experiment (PROCESS, Model 1) revealed a significant interaction between brand attachment and brand-cause congruence ( $b = -0.34$ ,  $t(139) = -2.26$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The Johnson-Neyman technique revealed a positive and significant congruence effect ( $b = 0.40$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) for brand attachment below 2.60, representing 66% of the sample. That is, for low attachment (below 2.60), when attitude toward the cause is low, the congruent cause generates greater intention to adhere than the incongruent cause, but not for high attachment levels, confirming  $H_{3a}$  (Graph 2, Panel A)

The same analysis was conducted for individuals with high levels of attitude toward the cause. The results showed that the coefficient associated with the interaction between brand-cause congruence and brand attachment was not significant ( $b = -0.11$ ,  $t(133) = -0.85$ ,  $p = 0.40$ ). The coefficient associated with brand attachment ( $b = 0.19$ ,  $t(133) = 1.98$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was significant, and the coefficient associated with the CSR action was close to significance ( $b = .66$ ,  $t(133) = 1.65$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ). Therefore, the results suggest that, for high attitude toward the cause, the brand attachment does not moderate the effect of brand-cause congruence on the intention to adhere to the cause, confirming  $H_{3b}$  (Graph 2, Panel B). However, the results also suggest that intention to adhere to the cause increases with brand attachment and, in a directional way, is greater for the cause congruent with the brand compared with the incongruent cause.

## Discussion

The second experiment supports hypotheses  $H_{3a}$  and  $H_{3b}$ . This result is consistent with the results by Barone et al. (2007) and Kwak and Kwon (2016). For contexts of strong attitude toward the cause, brand-cause congruence did not influence individuals' responses to support the cause, even though the intention to adhere to the cause is related to brand attachment. However, if the attitude is low, the brand attachment is an important stimulus to support these actions. If attachment and attitude are low, brand-cause congruence becomes the defining element of the intention to adhere to the cause. In addition, for less positive attitude toward the cause, results of the second experiment replicate those of the first experiment, but with two different brands and causes, thus increasing the results' generalization capacity.

Graph 2. Intention to adhere to the cause by congruence, attitude toward the cause and level of brand attachment.



## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Results of the two experiments showed that a brand's sponsorship of CSR actions positively influences consumers' intention to support such actions. However, as predicted, a consumer's higher or lower intention to adhere to causes that brands support is contingent on brand-cause congruence, brand attachment, and attitude toward the cause.

Using different brands and causes as stimuli, we showed that when consumers' attitude toward the cause is low, intention to adhere to the cause is higher when there is brand-cause congruence, but only when the brand attachment is low. When the brand attachment is high, brand-cause congruence becomes irrelevant for consumers' adherence. Conversely, when consumers' attitude toward the cause is high, intention to adhere to the cause increases as brand attachment increases. Moreover, we found that for consumers with low brand attachment, the perception of persuasive intent decreases the intention to adhere to the cause when congruence is low.

This study's results make important theoretical and managerial contributions. First, we proposed a theoretical framework to investigate the effect of three variables that had not been examined previously: brand-cause congruence, brand attachment, and attitude toward the cause. Integration of the relevant variables analyzed individually, in a single theoretical model, increases the capacity to both predict and explain

phenomena of interest, such as sponsorship of CSR actions. Integration of these three variables made it possible to identify that attitude toward the cause inhibits the negative effects of low brand attachment and low brand-cause congruence.

Second, this study shows that incongruent brand-cause CSR actions can be perceived as incoherent or inappropriate by consumers with low brand attachment, increasing the perception of persuasive intent and reducing the intention to adhere to the cause. Although previous studies (Romani & Grappi, 2014; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013; Vlachos et al., 2009) theoretically suggested this relationship, no study had tested this mediator effect empirically. Moreover, our results confirm that brand attachment functions as a protective barrier for brand reputation (Chiou et al., 2013; Fedorikhin, Park, & Thomson, 2008; Schmalz & Orth, 2012), since consumers with high brand attachment did not notice the persuasive intent of CSR actions incongruent with the brand.

Third, this study investigates consumers' intention to adhere to a cause promoted by a brand. While the benefits of sponsoring CSR actions are well documented (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Mohr et al., 2001), these actions' social results have received much less attention by previous studies (for exceptions, see Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Romani & Grappi, 2014; Romani et al., 2014). As social problems become more complex, the participation of more people in brand-led CSR actions becomes more relevant. For example, Stella Artois and its partner Water.Org

have already sold more than 225,000 glass chalices and donated the total amount of this campaign (more than USD 3 million) to the cause (Stella Artois, 2017). Likewise, the McHappy Day campaign, which has been promoted by McDonald's for more than 29 years, raised more than BRL 25 million in 2017, an amount destined for the treatment of children with cancer (McDia Feliz, 2017). These results were only possible because consumers adhered to social brand-led campaigns.

Similarly, this study makes important managerial contributions by giving strategic directions to brand managers who intend to increase their consumers' adherence to CSR actions. The present results show that attitude toward the cause is an important predictor of consumer adherence to CSR actions promoted by brands and can reduce the negative effect of low brand-cause congruence. Even so, brand managers should be careful in choosing CSR actions to be sponsored. The present results show that consumer adherence in incongruent actions tends to be lower, especially for people with low brand attachment.

However, promotion of CSR actions can also strengthen the relationship between consumers and brands, and positively affect the building of brand attachment (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Stanaland, Lwin, & Murphy, 2011). When consumers adhere to CSR actions, people realize that the brand's effort is fair and feel involved with the brand in solving social problems. This joint action has positive results not only for the beneficiaries of the social action but also for the brand.

Park et al. (2010) suggested that the stronger the brand attachment, the greater the will to engage in behaviors requiring reputation, time, money, or energy investments to strengthen or maintain the attachment with the target brand. Attachment enhances consumers' empathy and identification with the company and motivates commitment behaviors (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Therefore, sponsorship of socially responsible actions seems to have inspired this study's respondents to demonstrate exemplary and prosocial behaviors.

Finally, the results also indicate that adherence to CSR actions is greater among people with high brand attachment and higher attitude toward the cause. Therefore, brands can achieve better and faster results by aiming CSR action efforts at consumer segments with these characteristics.

## Limitations and future studies

The experiments reported here measured and not manipulated both brand attachment and attitude toward the cause. Manipulation of attachment is difficult to perform under experimental conditions

since the attachment is built and strengthened over time (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996). Manipulation of attachment would give greater assurance that this construct is not confused with similar variables, such as attitude toward the brand. However, since attitude does not have the same degree of intensity as attachment, we would probably not see the same effects. However, attitude toward the cause can be manipulated more easily and can be studied in the future.

The present results were obtained through experiments with undergraduate students; future studies can investigate these effects with broader populations. Moreover, only two brands were investigated; future studies may address a larger number of brands and causes. Likewise, it is worth investigating whether the effects obtained for intention to adhere to the cause would remain with variables of brand interest, such as the intention to increase brand consumption or attitude toward the brand.

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