






BRANDS AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOR: EXPLORING THE INTEGRATION OF CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS WITH CONSUMER PERCEIVED ETHICALITY

 **Renata de Sousa da Silva Tolentino**
Doctor of Business Administration
Universidade FUMEC – FUMEC.
Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais – Brasil.
rsousa@fumec.br

 **Cid Gonçalves Filho**
Doctor of Business Administration
Universidade FUMEC - FUMEC
Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais – Brasil.
cid@fumec.br

 **Jefferson Lopes La Falce**
Doctor of Business Administration
Universidade FUMEC; CEFET MG
Belo Horizonte, MG – Brasil
Jefferson.la.falce@gmail.com

 **Marcos Ferreira Santos**
Doctor of Business Administration
Universidad de La Sabana
Chía, Cundinamarca - Colombia
marcosfsantos@gmail.com

Objective: The relevance of ethical consumer perceptions (PEC) about companies is a topic that has grown in relevance, at a time when unethical business practices are increasingly questioned in Brazil. In this sense, this research aims to study the impacts of consumers' ethical perceptions on companies, and how this perception affects the development of the consumer-brand relationship, integrating attitudinal, conative, and behavioral elements.

Method: A survey was carried out with 538 questionnaires, analyzed through structural equations, with the reference market of manufacturers of cellular devices (smartphones).

Main Result: The consumer's ethical perception demonstrated contributions in the development of the consumer-brand relationship, under the attitudinal, conative, and action aspects. At an attitudinal level, the greatest impact of PEC is on consumer confidence. The total effects of PEC on behavioral intentions were consistent and relatively high, showing a strong relationship with loyalty, purchase intention, and brand value.

Contributions: We describe how the PEC affects the development of the consumer-brand relationship in a chain that represents its evolution, integrating the attitudinal, connective components of action, suggesting a central role of consumers' ethical perception in brand management. The model explained 79.2% of loyalty and 74.1% of purchase intent in the development structure of the consumer-brand relationship, based on the impact of ethical perceptions.

Originality: This research is the first to demonstrate the impact of Consumer Ethical Perception on the development of the consumer-brand relationship, integrating the three components, as well as demonstrating their impacts on the nomological chain and their consequent effects.

Keywords: Consumer-Brand Relationships. Consumer Perceived Ethicality. Consumer Behavior. Brand Equity.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in the number of research studies conducted in the ethics and social responsibility field (Wilkie & Moore, 2012). The ethical behavior of a company is assumed to affect consumers' impressions about their brand and its products and services (Hamidizadeh, Alavije, & Rezaee, 2014). In general, researchers seek to verify how ethics could impact the relationships between consumers and companies, its profits, and longevity in the long-term (Singhapakdi et al, 2008).

On the other hand, research on consumer-brand relationships (CBR) gains momentum (Fetscherin, 2020; Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017; Fetscherin & Heilman, 2015; Porto, 2018). Blackston (1992), one pioneer in the field, called for studies on consumers and their brand relationships. The process can be explained by the repeated interactions between a brand and a consumer having similar characteristics as interpersonal relationships and can conduct to long term and stable relations among consumers and brands (Khamitov, Wang and Thompson, 2019; Fournier, 1998). According to Fetscherin (2020), whilst academia and practitioners have paid attention to customer relationship management (CRM) in the past, consumer-brand relationships management (CBRM) is still in its infancy. In this sense, Sreejesh (2014, p.2) argues that “despite a plethora of research on consumer-brand relationships (CBR) spanning over the past one and half decades, the extant research failed to identify and integrate the attitudinal and behavioral components of CBR in their conceptualization and subsequent operationalization”. However, to sustain long-term CBR, there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents and consequences of CBR in both perspectives.

Efforts to integrate ethical perceptions and brands often proved controversial, and years of research have presented challenges for researchers and managers (Agarwal and Malhotra, 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). Specifically, Sierra et al. (2017) argue that, despite the representative number of studies relating ethics to marketing, research on ethics in the branding field is scarce. Among these studies are the works from Hunt (2019), Agarwal and Malhotra (2019), Sierra et al. (2017), and Hutchinson et al. (2013), that are in general more conceptual rather than empirical, or focused on specific aspects of consumer-brand relationships (Agarwal and Malhotra, 2019; Sierra et al., 2017).

Considering the extant research to operationalize and measure perceived ethics, one prominent advance was the proposal of Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE). CPE aims to explain consumers' perceptions of a company's ethical level (Brunk, 2010; Agarwal, Malhotra & Varshneya, 2019). In this sense, we observed in the last decade research linking CPE to brand

relationships related constructs, with significant findings, mostly related to its impacts on brand loyalty. However, no initiative was focused precisely on a CBR development framework. Therefore, there is a gap to understand how ethical perceptions would impact the development of consumer-brand relationships (Festcherin, 2020; Kim, Holland & Han, 2013; Sreejesh & Roy, 2015).

Therefore, the objective of this study is to describe the impacts of Consumer Perceived Ethicality on the continuous process of consumer-brand relationship development, integrating the attitudinal, conative, and behavioral components of CBR, identifying its direct, indirect, and total effects.

This study thus contributes to previous research in the following ways. First, it provides a better understanding of the impacts of CPE in a robust model of CBR, which in turn would benefit CBR theory and provide an actionable model for practitioners (Festscherin, 2020; Sreejesh, 2014). Research on the interaction between ethical behavior and CBR has not yet been registered in the studies and is considered the justification for this study.

Secondly, for academicians, the proposed framework is a prerequisite for identifying relevant constructs useful for positing and testing theory (Blut & Wang, 2020; Sreejesh, 2014; Huntley, 2006). For marketers, understanding the impacts of CPE on CBR, and would help to foster customer interactions with the brand, and the design marketing programs, more efficiently and effectively, covering attitudinal and behavioral aspects of CBR development (Sreejesh, 2014).

The article is structured as follows: in section 2, the conceptual background is presented. In section 3, the development of research hypotheses. In section 4, the methodology is presented. In sections 5, 6, and 7, data analysis, findings, and discussion are exhibited. Lastly, sections 8, 9, and 10 describe managerial implications, research limitations, future research directions, and conclusion.

Theoretical background

2.1 The Consumer and Ethical Choice

Historically, ethical consumption is often viewed as the behavior of a group of principled consumers (Shaw, 2007). Many definitions of ethical consumption refer to environmental issues (Trudel & Cotte, 2008) and recycling (Laroche & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001), social justice, human rights issues, and involvement in the exploitation of workers (Auger et al., 2010;

Becchetti & Costantino, 2010). In addition to these dominant issues, broader definitions include animal welfare (Megicks, Memery & Williams, 2008) and local community initiatives (Carrigan, Moraes & Leek, 2011). Finally, literature associates ethical consumption with consciously refusing to buy products regarding companies' behavior (Carrigan, Szmigin & Wright, 2004). It is also important to stress that the concerns about marketing and ethics include the ethical conduct of market research itself (Malhotra & Miller, 1998).

2.2 *Company's Ethical Behavior and Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE)*

In recent years, consumer research on the perception of ethical corporate practices and corporate social responsibility has been recurrent, usually aimed at verifying its impacts on business performance and possible leverage of competitive advantage (Chabowski, Mena & Gonzalez-Padron, 2011). Ethical principles are relevant not only for the consumers' purchasing behavior but also for their search for information about the reputation of the companies they want to relate to (Vitell & Muncy, 1992; Brunk, 2010). By contrast, a significant number of companies have been striving to develop an ethical reputation, employing corporate social responsibility strategies, developing codes of ethics, or communicating values to consumers such as honesty and integrity (Czinkota, Kaufmann & Basile, 2014).

Consumer Perceived Ethicality is defined by Brunk and Bluemelhuber (2011) as the consumers' aggregate perception of a subject's morality (company, brand, product, or service). According to Brunk (2011), consumer explanations of CPE illustrate the simultaneous application of deontological (norms-based) and teleological (outcome-based) considerations for ethical judgment, and the consumers' evaluation can be a mix of both streams of ethical theory. In this regard, a series of studies have been carried out to contextualize and explore this phenomenon. Brunk and Bluemelhuber (2011) conducted research that aimed to explore the nature of consumers' ethical perceptions. Methodologically, they conducted twenty in-depth face-to-face interviews with consumers in Britain and Germany and categorized the responses into major categories that describe the dimensions of the consumers' ethicality perceptions. The six dimensions identified relate to consumers, employees, environment, local community and economy, overseas community, and the business community. A second study by Brunk (2012) aimed at validating a CPE scale. Three complimentary pieces of research were carried out using qualitative and quantitative techniques, culminating in the specification, conceptualization, and validation of the scale of Consumer Perceived Ethicality.

Consumer-Brand Relationships

According to Blackston (1992), the consumer-brand relationship is a logical extension of the personality of the brand, resembling the relationship between people. Fournier (1998) suggests that the brand relationship is an emotional bond resulting from the interaction between consumers and brands (Kaufmann et al., 2012). Aaker (1998) reinforces this perspective stating that "the relationship concept between a brand and a person, is like what happens between two people, which opens a distinct perspective about the operating mode (...) of the brand" (pg. 159). Consequently, the brand has won a human-like status. In this sense, the phenomenon of dependency between people and brands was investigated with the literature's perspective of interpersonal relationships, in which the latter present themselves as a dialog, reciprocal and non-metaphorical (Berger and Luckman, 2002; Blackston, 1993).

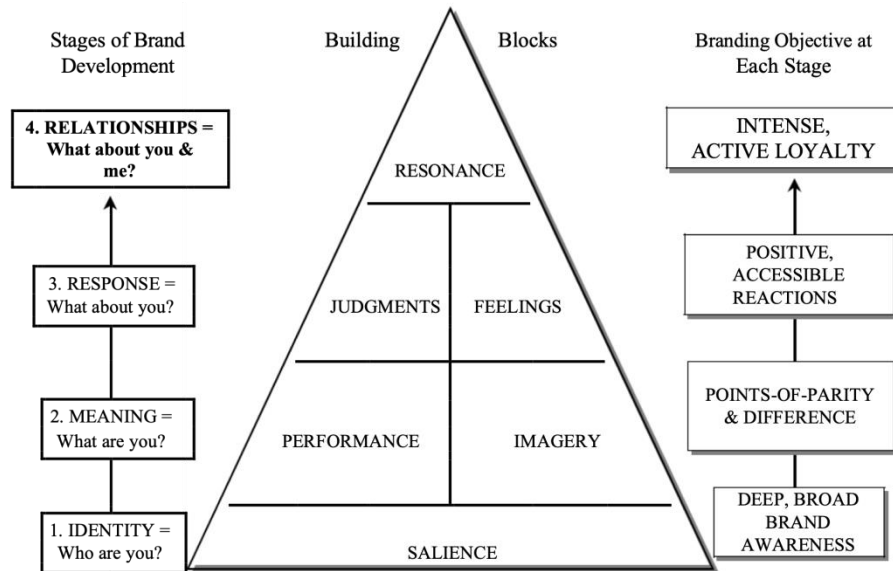
Since the introduction of the CBR concept and framework, researchers and practitioners had explored how CBR could be developed and enhanced over time, and which would be the stages and constructs involved. The literature considers, in general, there are some outcomes of CBR, as brand loyalty, brand equity, purchase intention, and share of voice (WOM) (Fetscherin, 2020). Regarding extant research, we observe empirical evidence of CBR antecedents as brand awareness, brand trust, brand commitment, brand attachment, engagement, love, image, commitment, and satisfaction (Fetscherin, 2020). Models involving these constructs present consistencies and similarities, however, they are not focused on CBR development stages and considers a specific combination of relations.

According to Sreejesh (2014), these efforts to decompose the continuous process of relationship development into manageable growth segments, differ in the number of stages that are posited, the nature of the processes critical for development at each stage, and the mechanisms governing transitions between stages. For managers, the understanding of this process and how it works and interacts with consumer's perceptions are fundamental tasks to develop strong brands. One of the preliminary efforts to explain CBR development was proposed by Fournier (1998), which suggested that all the interactions between the brand and consumers create meanings, elaboration, and reinforcement processes. These processes foster brand relationship quality (BRQ), causing relationship stability and durability.

Another classic proposal was elaborated by Keller (2009). According to his model of development of customer-based brand equity, there are four stages to build brand equity. Brand resonance is defined as the higher stage of brand equity, and it depicts four key relationships

that profoundly influence the four dimensions of brand resonance. Although from a marketer’s perspective, the most important relationship, according to Keller (2009) may be ultimately between the consumer and the brand. Keller's model is presented in Image 1.

Image 1 - Customer-based brand equity model pyramid



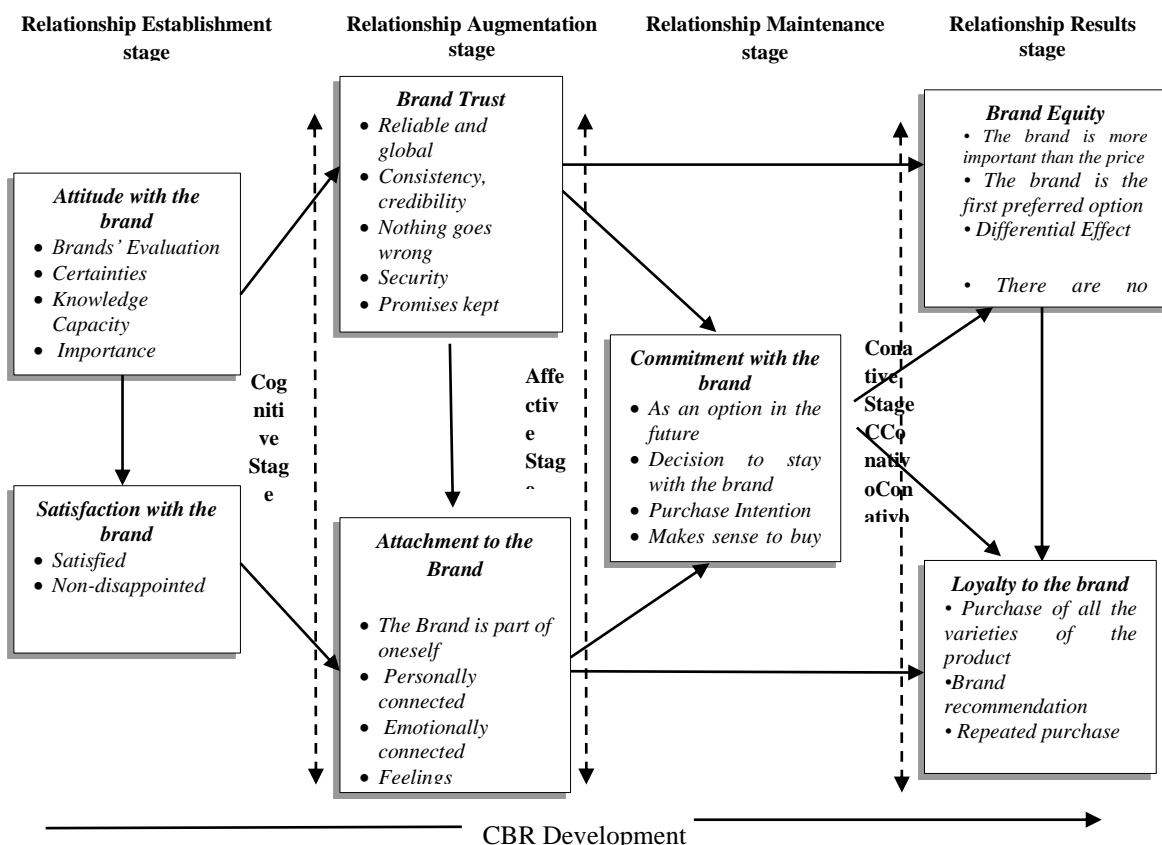
Source: Keller (2009).

This model presents similarities with the proposal of Oliver (1997), which suggested four phases of brand loyalty: cognitive, affective, conative, and action. As we observe, stages 1 and 2 of Keller's proposal, salience (awareness) and performance/imagery, that consists of rational steps in which consumers have initial contacts with brands (cognitive orientation). In step 3 (judgments and feelings) we observe that the presence of an effective component, conducting to conative attitudes. The last step should be an intense loyalty and active stage, in which a consumer-brand relationship is established. It was also observed considerable efforts from practitioners to define what would be the stages to develop strong consumer-brand relationships. For example, we can cite the model proposed by RAKUTEN Corp. (awareness, acquaintance, trust, infatuation, fidelity, and evangelism) and BERA (new, dating, love, boredom, and divorce) (Rakuten, 2017; Fetscherin, 2020).

Sreejesh (2014) and Sreejesh & Roy (2015) designed studies using a mixed-methods approach that explored the integration of attitudinal, behavioral, and conative constructs, aiming at proposing an integrated model of Consumer-Brand Relationships development. The framework proposed is consistent with Oliver's four-stage loyalty model, as the constructs are

organized in stages formed sequentially with patterns cognitive, affective, conative, and action (Oliver, 1997, p. 394). In the first phase of his work, qualitative research was carried out to understand the dimensions of CBR, from the perspective of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). At the cognitive stage, consumers develop the attitude strength by comparing the brand and its alternatives, based on past experiences and/or knowledge related to the offer, brand attributes, performance, or information, The second stage of CBR development consists of an effective one, in which a deepening of the relationship takes place. The third stage refers to the maintenance of the relationship or conative stage, in which the consumer develops a situation of commitment with the brand, deciding to continue with that brand, also anticipating a future purchase option. Finally, the relationship results or behavioral outcome phase would consist of brand equity, brand loyalty, purchase intention, and positive word of mouth. This model presented in Image 2

Image 2 - Theoretical Model – Development of Consumer Brand Relationships



Source: Sreejesh & Roy (2015).

Hypotheses and model development

According to Brunk and Blumelhuber (2011), a company that behaves ethically observes that the impressions of consumers about their products and services can change significantly for the better. Consumers appreciate the company as a responsible member of society, and this can impact brand equity, trust, commitment, and attachment to it (Brunk & Blumelhuber, 2011). Similarly, for Wu and Chen (2015) consumers gain trust in a brand when they evaluate the company as behaving ethically. Bejou, Ennew, and Palmer (1998) verified a significant impact of ethical perception on trust in financial services.

Chinomona (2013) identified that consumer experience with the brand significantly and positively influences satisfaction, trust, and brand attachment. Similar results were proposed and tested by Sreejesh (2014), which observed that consumer's attitudes towards a brand affect trust and satisfaction. According to Schmalz and Orth (2012), brand attachment is an important determinant of consumer responses to the ethics practiced by the firm. Schmalz and Orth (2012) investigated that brand attachment would protect brands of corporate ethical errors, corroborating with Hupman's and Zaichkowsky's findings (1995). Also, Arjoon and Rambocas (2011) provided empirical support for a direct positive relationship between customer perception of ethics and customer loyalty with brand commitment acting as a mediator. Nga & Mun (2013) elicited that brand trust had a significant positive relationship with consumer ethical perceptions of a firm. Similar results were obtained by Singh, Iglesias, and Foguet (2012). Derived from these sources, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H01: Consumer Perceived Ethicality has a significant effect on brand trust.

H02: Consumer Perceived Ethicality has a significant effect on commitment.

H03: Consumer Perceived Ethicality has a significant effect on brand attachment.

Chiu, Huang, and Yen (2010) hold that consumers, who trust a brand, are willing to improve and maintain effective bonds with the brand, and observed relationships between brand trust and brand attachment, as observed empirically by Sreejesh (2014) and Chinomona and Maziriri (2017). Chaudhuri and Hoolbrook (2002) compared 107 brands and found a highly significant relation between brand trust and brand effect. On the other hand, brand trust is often emphasized as one of the essential elements for consumers to develop a sense of commitment to this partner (Bloemer & Oderkerken-Schröder, 2002; Chaudhuri & Hoolbrook, 2002). Sreejesh (2014) observed empirically this relation in a consumer brand relationship model. In

this sense, Morgan and Hunt (1994) proposed that trust and commitment are variables that encourage partners in a relationship and reduce the perception of risk in the market environment. Dennis et al. (2016) observed a significant effect of brand trust on commitment in Higher Education Institutions reinforcing its importance.

Verifying the effect of trust on brand equity in the mobile phone market, Dib's and Alhaddad's (2014) found a positive significant impact. Sreejesh (2014) verified empirically the impact of trust on brand equity in comprehensive a consumer-brand relationship model. In this sense, These results are similar to the findings of Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014), with data related to the academic environment.

Furthermore, in the marketing literature, attachment is considered as an essential element for the development of brand loyalty and increase equity (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Dennis et al. (2016) concluded that brand attachment is the main antecedent of the brand's strength, affecting satisfaction, trust, and commitment as well as brand equity. On the other hand, Zhang et al. (2013) suggest that brand attachment has an indirect effect on brand commitment. Park, MacInnis, and Priester (2009 p.8) argue that brand attachment has a positive correlation with brand equity. These observations agree with Sreejesh (2014), that examined and verified empirically this relation. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H04: Brand trust has a significant effect on brand attachment.

H05: Brand trust has a significant effect on brand commitment.

H06: Brand trust has a significant effect on brand equity.

H07: Brand attachment has a significant effect on brand commitment.

Schmalz and Orth (2012) concluded that commitment was identified as a moderator of negative or unethical information effects on brands' attitudes and evaluations (Rohini, Robert & Unnava, 2000; Ingram & Skinner. 2005). Higher levels of commitment are in general associated with the perception of future gains, identification with the partner, limited desire to seek other partners, and more investment made in the relationship (Knapp & Taylor, 1994). Keller (1993) argues that the construction of brand equity is due to brand commitment, a finding, which is confirmed empirically by Sreejesh (2014). Dick and Basu (1994) as well as Hess and Story (2005) argue that committed consumers tend to develop positive attitudes toward brands (Chaudhuri, 2006). Dennis et al. (2016) observed a significant impact of brand commitment on brand equity in Higher Education Institutions reinforcing its importance. In this

sense, Zhang (2015) observed that brand equity could be leveraged by commitment and value in online consumer communities.

On the other hand, the relationship between brand commitment and loyalty has been recurrent in the literature. McAlexander, Kim, and Roberts (2003) empirically observed that the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty was mediated by brand commitment. Iglesias et al. (2011) confirmed that affective commitment mediates the relationship between brand experience and loyalty. Similarly, Hur et al. (2010) observed relationships among commitment, loyalty, and purchase intention. Datta (2003), discussing loyalty antecedents, argues that brand commitment has positive effects on retaining consumers and re-purchases. Fullerton (2003, 2005a, 2005b) explored and observed the effects of commitment on loyalty. Therefore, we conclude one of the beneficial effects of commitment and loyalty reflected in a positive relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001, Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Moorman et al., 1992) and hypothesize:

H08: Brand commitment has a significant effect on brand equity.

H09: Brand commitment has a significant effect on brand loyalty.

H10: Brand commitment has a significant effect on purchase intention.

Coob-Walgren, Ruble, and Donthu (1995) analyzed two datasets of data and observed that brands with the higher brand equity in each category of products generated significantly greater preferences and purchase intentions. Esch, Langner, and Geus (2006) verified the impacts of brand image and brand awareness on the consumers' purchase intentions. In the same direction, Jalilvand, Samiei, and Mahdavinia (2011) observed the effect of brand equity components on purchase intention in the automobile Industry.

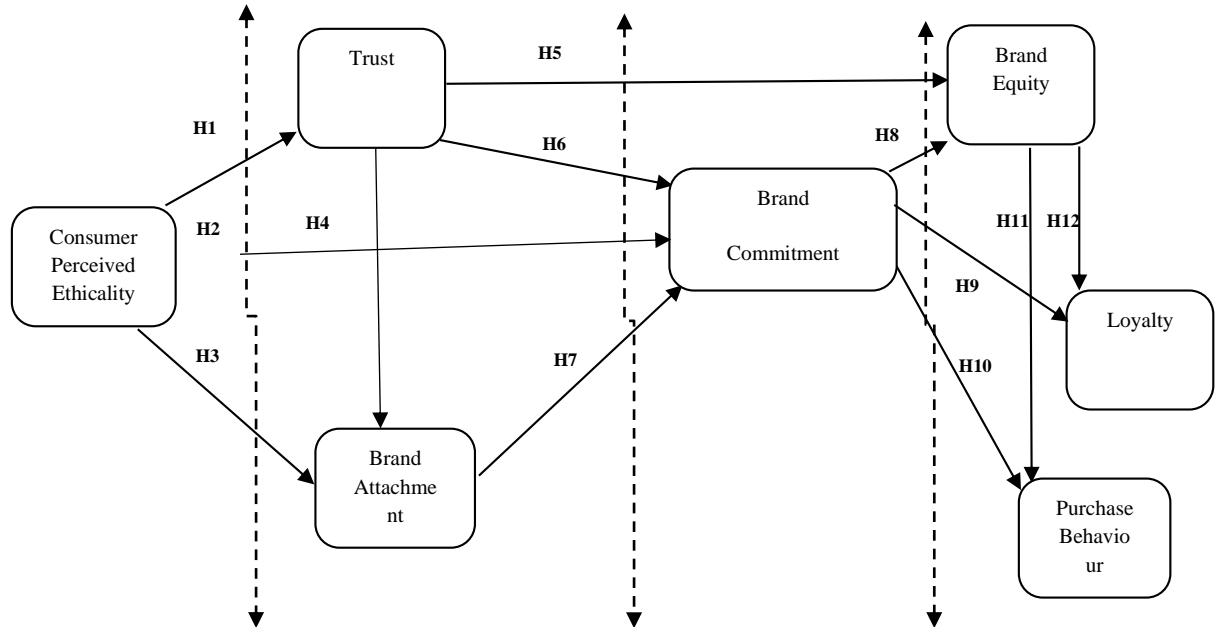
Moreover, Sreejesh (2014) verified the impact of brand equity on brand loyalty in a consumer-brand relationship framework. Dlacic and Kezman (2014) observed empirically that elements of brand equity do increase customer brand loyalty in the pharmaceutical market. In this sense, Taylor, Celuch, and Goodwin (2004), in a nation-wide sample of industrial customers of heavy equipment manufacturers, obtained results that suggest that brand equity and trust are consistently the most relevant antecedents to both behavioral and attitudinal forms of customer loyalty. In this sense, we proposed the next hypotheses:

H11: Brand equity has a significant effect on the purchase intention.

H12: Brand equity has a significant effect on brand loyalty.

Therefore, the hypothetical research model is presented in Image 3:

Image 3 - Hypothetical Research Model



Source: Authors.

Methodology

To accomplish the objectives of the research, a descriptive and quantitative approach was adopted. A face-to-face survey was executed, collecting 538 questionnaires in March 2017, with pre-trained research assistants. The respondents consisted of students of a large Brazilian capital (Belo Horizonte, 3rd city in population size in the country) possessing smartphones. The questionnaire evaluated the CPE of main smartphone manufacturers, as Apple and Samsung. The survey phase was applied in a laboratory environment (Malhotra, 2007), and the respondents received a “snack free ticket” as an incentive.

The translation and validation of the scales followed procedures recommended by Sousa and Rojjanasrirat (2011). Firstly, we did the translation of the original instrument into Portuguese, using bilingual and bicultural translators. Secondly, blind back-translation (blind backward translation) of the preliminary initial translated version of the instrument was accomplished. An expert panel was then asked to evaluate each item of the instrument for content equivalence, during a pilot testing of the pre-final version in Portuguese. A pre-test was

done with 15 respondents, that reported that they understood the questions and described correctly their understanding of the items. The psychometric testing of the pre-final version of the translated instrument was done with the survey data, as described in section 5. The questionnaire was composed of multi-item eleven-point scales anchored by 10 = "strongly agree" and 0 = "strongly disagree, to facilitate treatment as continuous quantitative variables, all of the Likert type (Churchill, 1979). To operationalize the measurement of variables, the scales were obtained from the literature. Details about the items are presented in Appendix 1. The sources of the scales are shown in Table 1:

Table 1 - Measurement Scales

Construct	Source	Number of items	Sample items
Brand Attachment	Park et al. (2010)	10	[Brand name is] part of you and who you are
Brand Trust	He, Li & Harris (2012)	4	I trust this brand
Brand Commitment	Eisingerich & Rubera (2010)	4	Even if [brand name] would be more difficult to buy, I would keep buying it
Brand Equity	Yoo & Donthu (2001)	4	Prefer to buy over other brands
Brand Loyalty	Petzer et al. (2014)	7	I consider myself loyal to this brand
Purchase Intention	Long-Chuan et.al. (2014)	5	I would consider buying this product
Consumer Perceived Ethicality	Brunk (2012)	6	(Company/brand) respects moral norms

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Data analysis and results

This section presents the procedures of analysis of the study, as well as the results obtained with the application of quantitative research. The sample consisted of men (52%) and women (48%), with a family income of R \$ 2,001 to 6,000 (46%), or more than R \$ 9,000 (23%), aged between 19 and 35 years (85%), the average age of 25 years ($s = 7.9$), predominantly incomplete tertiary level (75%) and single marital status (87%). The brands that dominated the research are Samsung and Apple, and 68.3% of consumers own these brands and answered the questionnaire about them. Data analysis started with preliminary procedures, such as the identification of uni and multivariate outliers, missing values, and verification of linearity, normality, and multi-collinearity assumptions.

To verify the dimensionality of the scales, we used the Exploratory Factorial Analysis of the scales (extraction by Principal Components and application of the Screeplot and eigenvalue criterion superior to 1). The achieved values of 0.821 to 0,938 are considered adequate, indicating that factor analysis is appropriate for the data. Results indicated one-dimensional solutions in all cases, with commonalities greater than 0.500, variance explained (Kaiser-Meyer-Olsen) considered "very good" (Hair et al., 2010).

Common method bias was assessed with Harman's single-factor test. The unrotated (PCA) EFA showed a multi-factor solution and a first factor explained variance of 33%; these data along with low intra-respondent variance (Hyman and Sierra, 2012) indicate CMB was not an issue.

The validity of the measurements was assessed using the model of simultaneous equations with latent variables (Netemeyer, Bearden & Sharma, 2003), applying the Partial Least Squares (PLS) estimation (Hair et al., 2010).

In the convergent validity phase, as Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips (1991) suggest, the factorial loads of the constructs to be significant at the level of 5% or 1% (through single-tailed tests with critical $t = 1.65$ or $t = 2.33$), for obtaining evidence validity convergence of the constructs. The Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Cronbach's Alpha (CA) measures were also calculated. All the details about the scale items, convergent validity, and reliability are available in Appendix 1. To evaluate the variance shared within factor items and between factors, the discriminant validity of the scales was evaluated by evaluating whether the mean-variance extracted from the indicators was less than the variance shared between the theoretical constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results demonstrate that there was discriminant validity with high to moderate correlations between constructs. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 - Discriminant Validity

	Brand Attachment	Brand Equity	CPE - Ethicality	Commitment	Loyalty	Purchase Intention	Trust
1.Brand Attachment	0.818						
2.Brand Equity	0.595	0.918					
3.CPE - Ethicality	0.497	0.594	0.881				
4.Commitment	0.700	0.714	0.594	0.865			
5.Loyalty	0.739	0.798	0.573	0.847	0.889		
6.Purchase Intention	0.620	0.775	0.621	0.817	0.831	0.874	
7.Brand Trust	0.440	0.546	0.686	0.585	0.525	0.604	0.908
AVE	0.669	0.843	0.777	0.749	0.790	0.784	0.824
CR	0.953	0.955	0.965	0.922	0.963	0.942	0.949
CA	0.945	0.938	0.958	0.886	0.955	0.923	0.929

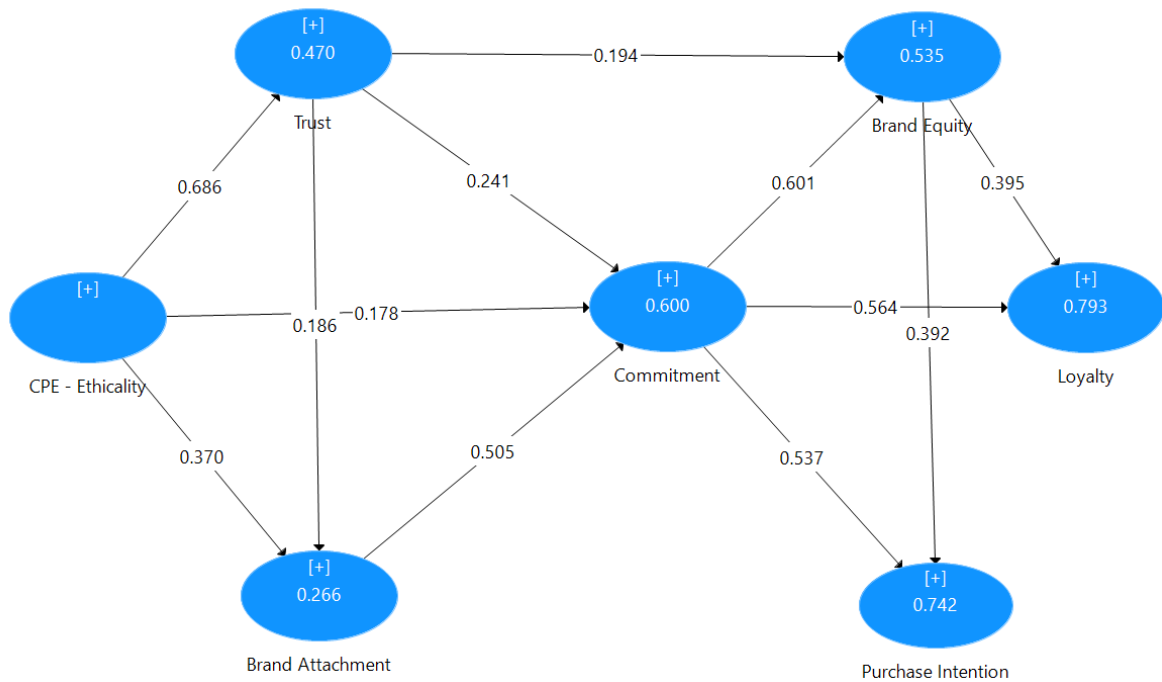
Source: Survey data. **Caption:** diagonal: square of AVE of each construct. Collums: Correlation within constructs.

In terms of measurement quality, as the data showed good adequacy, since the Average Extracted Variance (AVE) exceeded 0.500 (Bollen, 1989), and the Cronbach Alpha (AC) and Composite Reliability (CC) reliability measures exceed 0,700.

In sequence, the analysis of the hypothetical model was accomplished. This procedure was done by applying the technique of structural equation modeling, affording the potential to test models of interrelations between constructs in a single approach, while considering the impact of the measurement errors in the estimates. Partial least squares - structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was applied to test the model, as it is a method of structural equation modeling that allows estimating complex cause-effect relationship models with latent variables. (Ringle 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

All weights of the Images are standardized and significant at the 1% level. Image 3 show the results for the group with unethical stimulus:

Image 3 - Research model



Source: Survey data.

The SRMR was 0.069, lower than the threshold of 0.08 suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999) and much lower than 0.10 proposed by Ringle (2015), so the model fits well for SRMR. The confidence interval of SRMR included the original value of SRMR for the estimated model (99%), indicating adequate fit. The Stoner-Gleiser (Q2) measure indicates predictive relevance when its value is greater than 1. In this case, all constructs in both models have predictive relevance. Also, the value of the GoF for both models is presented, which is above 50%, indicating the model's overall predictive capacity (Vinzi, Trinchera & Amato, 2010).

To analyze the significant paths, we used the bootstrap procedure that allowed us to generate t-test estimates and significance. The results of the hypothesis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 – Test of Model Hypotheses – Path Coefficients (direct effects)

Path	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values
Brand Attachment -> Commitment	0.506	0.031	16.108	0.000
Brand Equity -> Loyalty	0.397	0.040	9.858	0.000
Brand Equity -> Purchase Intention	0.395	0.039	9.972	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Brand Attachment	0.373	0.056	6.647	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Commitment	0.180	0.046	3.898	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Trust	0.687	0.029	23.283	0.000
Commitment -> Brand Equity	0.600	0.037	16.156	0.000
Commitment -> Loyalty	0.562	0.038	14.827	0.000
Commitment -> Purchase Intention	0.533	0.039	13.595	0.000
Trust -> Brand Attachment	0.184	0.054	3.421	0.001
Trust -> Brand Equity	0.195	0.042	4.649	0.000
Trust -> Commitment	0.238	0.042	5.747	0.000

Source: Research data.

Observations: a) SAMPLE is the standardized weight obtained for complete sample; b) The error is the estimated error of the estimate; c) The value t is the ratio of the weight not standardized by its standard error. D) p value relates to the significance probability.

The R Square values were generated and presented in Table 5. As we can verify, the model has a good explicative capability.

Table 5 –R Square

Endogenous Construct	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Brand Equity	0.535	0.533
Commitment	0.600	0.598
Loyalty	0.793	0.792
Purchase Intention	0.742	0.741
Trust	0.470	0.469

Source: Research data.

As the one objective of the research is to identify the effects of CPE on CBR development, all the indirect and total effects were measured, and presented in Table 6. In Appendix 2, all the c indirect effects are also described, as they reveal all the paths measured.

Table 6 – Total Effects (direct + indirect)

Path	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P values
Brand Attachment -> Brand Equity	0.304	0.029	10.389	0.000
Brand Attachment -> Commitment	0.506	0.031	16.108	0.000
Brand Attachment -> Loyalty	0.405	0.030	13.346	0.000
Brand Attachment -> Purchase Intention	0.390	0.029	13.529	0.000
Brand Equity -> Loyalty	0.397	0.040	9.858	0.000
Brand Equity -> Purchase Intention	0.395	0.039	9.972	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Brand Attachment	0.500	0.032	15.438	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Brand Equity	0.493	0.031	15.990	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Commitment	0.597	0.033	17.760	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Loyalty	0.531	0.030	17.558	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Purchase Intention	0.513	0.031	16.677	0.000
CPE - Ethicality -> Trust	0.687	0.029	23.283	0.000
Commitment -> Brand Equity	0.600	0.037	16.156	0.000
Commitment -> Loyalty	0.800	0.024	33.900	0.000
Commitment -> Purchase Intention	0.770	0.026	29.561	0.000
Trust -> Brand Attachment	0.184	0.054	3.421	0.001
Trust -> Brand Equity	0.393	0.043	9.123	0.000
Trust -> Commitment	0.331	0.053	6.311	0.000
Trust -> Loyalty	0.342	0.044	7.911	0.000
Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.333	0.042	7.923	0.000

Source: Research data.

Observations: a) SAMPLE is the standardized weight obtained for complete sample; b) The error is the estimated error of the estimate; c) The value t is the ratio of the weight not standardized by its standard error. D) p value relates to the significance probability.

In next sections, these findings are described and discussed.

Findings

The results show that brand trust is the most affected construct in the nomological chain by perceived ethicality, which corroborates the theory proposed by Brunk and Blumelhuber (2011). It is also relevant and central, the effect of brand commitment (conative stage) on all the outcomes (loyalty, purchase, and equity), with weights varying from 0.533 to 0.600, which

indicates the concern of consumers with the ethical behavior of organizations (Chinomona, 2013; Wu & Chen, 2015). Considering the mediating constructs of CBR development model, we can observe that brand attachment ($\beta = 0.50$) is more relevant construct, than brand trust ($\beta = 0.308$), regarding commitment reinforcement. These results demonstrate how relevant are emotional connections to brands, to boost conative behaviors, validating the statements described in the literature (Bloemer & Oderkerken-Schröder, 2002; Chaudhuri & Hoolbrook, 2002). Data suggests that brands that forge emotional bonds and are more self-connected, can achieve higher levels of commitment than brands that are just “trustable and reliable”, suggesting that brand attachment could afford a competitive advantage to brands. This result indicates that the brand value is influenced by commitment, corroborating Zhang's statements (2015).

According to Table 4, all the paths of the model are significant at $p < 0.01$ level, demonstrating that this CBR development framework presents consistency, as suggested by Fetscherin (2020) and Sreejesh (2014). Regarding the effects of perceived ethicality on CBR, the analysis of Table 6 provides relevant insights. Firstly, all the total effects of CPE in all the constructs it has direct and indirect effects, are greater than 0.493, a fact that suggests a central role of CPE in CBR development and brand management. Secondly, considering the constructs that mediate the model, CPE drives all of them: brand commitment ($\beta = 0,597$), brand attachment ($\beta = 0,500$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0,687$). Therefore, CPE could help consumers to provide purpose and meaning to brands, which consists of aspects that are growing in importance in the field (Renshaw, 2019; Sinek, 2009).

Finally, results reveal that a perceived ethicality is able to impact significantly and strongly brand outcomes, as it presents weights as $\beta = 0.531$ on brand loyalty, $\beta = 0.513$ on purchase intention, and $\beta = 0.493$ on brand equity (total effects). These results corroborate the literature that indicates that consumers' perceptions of ethical behavior can influence perceptions about products and services (Brunk & Blumelhuber, 2011), improves brand loyalty (Chiomona, 2013; Wu & Chen, 2015), positively influence trust (Ennew & Palmer, 1998; Sreejesh, 2014) as well as influence brand commitment (Arjoon & Rambocas, 2011).

Discussion

This research aimed to describe the impact of consumer perceived ethicality (CPE) on consumer-brand relationships (CBR) development. A comprehensive model was tested, having CPE as a driver of a hypothetical model of mediation and its consequences. The model presented was able to present a significant capacity for the explanation of brand outcomes.

According to the results, CPE has significant effects (>0.49) in all the constructs of the CBR development model. It means that CPE is an entrance ticket to relationship development with consumers. As the impacts are the mediation constructs and outcomes, conduct to consistent conclusions of the relevance of CPE for younger generations.

In recent years, these cohorts had observed fast changes in the environment, political and business ecosystems, and passed through the COVID 19 pandemic. They also perceived different behaviors of firms under these scenarios, as a relevant number of them did actions to help and contribute to health assistance institutions, donated drugs, and fed vulnerable groups, facts that are connected to a mindset that are gaining adherence all over the world. In the future, it is possible that this (brand-consumer) “ethical-self-congruent effect” could be even more relevant to effective brand management.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, this research offers interesting implications. Results obtained purport companies should dedicate their efforts to generate perceived ethicality, that will bring relevant brand outcomes. In sequence, we will present some managerial implications related to specific results. First, the research demonstrated how perceived ethicality is relevant to boosting brand trust. According to the results, trust impacts brand equity and brand loyalty, two important profit drivers. In this sense, managers should present special care in CPE management, conduct consumer research to measure ethical consumer perceptions and create actions that foment CPE level, elsewhere brand trust would be hardly affected.

Secondly, managers should be aware how brand attachment drives commitment in a CBR development nomological chain. The results suggest that a plan to increase CPE should take advantage of communication and brand building activities that can create self-connection and emotional bonds to consumers.

On the other hand, brand commitment demonstrated to be central to CBR development, integrated with CPE. Commitment tends to a more stable construct, and it mediates the relations in the model, with high impacts on all outcomes, with a higher intensity on brand equity (Bloemer & Oderkerken-Schröder, 2002; Chaudhuri & Hoolbrook, 2002). In this sense, as brand equity differentiate and add value to a generic product, as it creates competitive advantage and positively impacts on choice, makes sense investments to forge commitment, and CPE is one aspect to be considered in this process.

Finally, managers should be aware that CPE boosts all the outcomes of the brand development model. Recently, serious efforts were observed from manufacturers (including of smartphones), of planning and deployment strategies that area related to ethical values, social causes, health and wellbeing of employees, customers and communities. These actions were more present with greater intensity in the last few months, possibly due to the COVID 19 pandemic. This research results suggests that these brands would nourish positive outcomes, as their CPE would grow, as it is a relevant element to create value, purpose and inspiration for consumers, firms and its brands (Renshaw, 2019; Sinek, 2009).

Limitations and future research

This research is not exempt from limitations, which can motivate further investigation. First, the results come from a unique sample of transversal design study, that involves consumer perceived ethicality and CBR development framework. Secondly, the findings suggest other areas of research concerning the study of CPE to develop CBR. Thus, one area of future research involves the application of this model in different contexts, as service companies and retailers, considering local and global origin of the company.

A third area for further research concerns to verify if brand relationship quality (BRQ; Fournier, 1998; Fetscherin, 2020) could moderate the effects of CBR in the model. Finally, it is suggested to integrate more constructs related to classic brand-relationships theory, such as brand love, into the model of this research, to increase its capacity to understand and interpret the phenomenon.

Conclusion

This research extends the study of consumer perceived ethicality by testing a model that considers CPE as a relevant driver of CBR development. Results prove this significant influence, and demonstrate the existence of relevant moderators which interact to promote brand outcomes. Therefore, this study emphasizes and describes the role of consumer perceived ethicality and its impacts on CBR development.

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MARCAS E COMPORTAMENTO ÉTICO: EXPLORANDO A INTEGRAÇÃO DO RELACIONAMENTO CONSUMIDOR-MARCA E ÉTICA PERCEBIDA PELOS CONSUMIDORES

 **Renata de Sousa da Silva Tolentino**
Doutora em Administração
Universidade FUMEC – FUMEC.
Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais – Brasil.
rsousa@fumec.br

 **Cid Gonçalves Filho**
Doutor em Administração
Universidade FUMEC – FUMEC.
Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais – Brasil.
cid@fumec.br

 **Jefferson Lopes La Falce**
Doutor em Administração
Universidade FUMEC; CEFET MG
Belo Horizonte, MG – Brasil
Jefferson.la.falce@gmail.com

 **Marcos Ferreira Santos**
Doutor em Administração
Universidad de La Sabana
Chía, Cundinamarca, Colombia
marcosfsantos@gmail.com

Objetivo: A relevância das percepções éticas do consumidor (PEC) sobre as empresas é tema que tem crescido de relevância, em um momento que práticas não éticas empresárias são cada vez mais questionadas no Brasil. Neste sentido, esta pesquisa visa estudar os impactos das percepções éticas dos consumidores sobre empresas, e como esta percepção afeta o desenvolvimento da relação consumidor-marca, integrando elementos atitudinais, conativos e comportamentais.

Método: Foi realizado um levantamento com 538 questionários, analisados através de equações estruturais, tendo como mercado referência fabricantes de dispositivos celulares (*smartphones*).

Resultado Principal: A percepção ética do consumidor demonstrou contribuições no desenvolvimento do relacionamento consumidor-marca, sob os aspectos atitudinais, conativos e de ação. Em nível atitudinal o maior impacto da PEC é na confiança do consumidor. Os efeitos totais da PEC nas intenções comportamentais foram consistentes e relativamente elevados, demonstrando forte relação com a lealdade, intenção de compra e valor da marca.

Contribuições:

Descrevemos como a PEC afeta o desenvolvimento do relacionamento consumidor-marca em uma cadeia que representa sua evolução, integrando os componentes atitudinais, conativos de ação, sugerindo um papel central da percepção ética dos consumidores na gestão de marcas. O modelo explicou 79,2% da lealdade e 74,1% da intenção de compra na estrutura de desenvolvimento do relacionamento consumidor marca, tendo como base o impacto das percepções éticas.

Originalidade: Esta pesquisa é a primeira que demonstra o impacto da Percepção Ética do Consumidor no desenvolvimento do relacionamento consumidor-marca, integrando os três componentes, bem como demonstrando seus impactos na cadeia nomológica e seus efeitos consequentes.

Palavras Chaves: Relacionamento consumidor-marca. Ética percebida pelo consumidor. Comportamento do consumidor. Valor da marca.

Como citar

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Introdução

Desde a década de 1990, houve um crescimento no número de pesquisas executadas na área de ética e responsabilidade social (Wilkie & Moore, 2012). Supõe-se que o comportamento ético de uma empresa afeta as impressões dos consumidores sobre sua marca e seus produtos e serviços (Hamidzadeh, Alavije, & Rezaee, 2014). Em geral, os pesquisadores procuram investigar como a ética pode impactar as relações entre consumidores e empresas, seus lucros e a longevidade no longo prazo (Singhapakdi et al, 2008).

Por outro lado, a pesquisa sobre relacionamento consumidor-marca (RCM) ganha tração (Fetscherin, 2020; Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017; Fetscherin & Heilman, 2015; Porto, 2018). Blackston (1992), um pioneiro na área, convocou estudos sobre os consumidores e suas relações com as marcas. O processo pode ser explicado pelas repetidas interações entre uma marca e um consumidor com características semelhantes às relações interpessoais e pode conduzir a relações estáveis e de longo prazo entre consumidores e marcas (Khamitov, Wang e Thompson, 2019; Fournier, 1998). De acordo com Fetscherin (2020), embora a academia e os profissionais tenham prestado atenção à gestão de relacionamento com o cliente (GRC) no passado, a gestão de relacionamento consumidor-marca (GRCM) ainda está em sua infância. Nesse sentido, Sreejesh (2014, p.2) argumenta que “apesar de uma infinidade de pesquisas sobre as relações consumidor-marca (RCM) abrangendo as últimas décadas e meia, a pesquisa existente falhou em identificar e integrar os componentes atitudinais e comportamentais do RCM na sua conceituação e posterior operacionalização”. No entanto, para sustentar a RCM de longo prazo, há uma necessidade de uma compreensão abrangente dos antecedentes e das consequências da RCM em ambas as perspectivas.

Os esforços para integrar percepções éticas e marcas muitas vezes se mostraram controversos, e anos de pesquisa apresentaram desafios para pesquisadores e gerentes (Agarwal e Malhotra, 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). Especificamente, Sierra et al. (2017) argumentam que, apesar do número representativo de estudos relacionando a ética ao marketing, as pesquisas sobre ética na área de branding são escassas. Entre esses estudos estão os trabalhos de Hunt (2019), Agarwal e Malhotra (2019), Sierra et al. (2017) e Hutchinson et al. (2013), que são em geral mais conceituais do que empíricos, ou focados em aspectos específicos das relações consumidor-marca (Agarwal e Malhotra, 2019; Sierra et al., 2017).

Considerando as pesquisas existentes para operacionalizar e estimar a ética percebida, um avanço de destaque foi a proposta de Ética Percebida pelo Consumidor (EPC). O EPC visa explicar as percepções dos consumidores sobre o nível ético de uma empresa (Brunk, 2010;

Agarwal, Malhotra & Varshneya, 2019). Nesse sentido, observamos na última década pesquisas relacionando o EPC aos construtos relacionados ao relacionamento com a marca, com achados significativos, principalmente relacionados aos seus impactos na fidelidade à marca. No entanto, nenhuma iniciativa foi focada precisamente em uma estrutura de desenvolvimento RCM. Portanto, há uma lacuna para entender como as percepções éticas impactariam o desenvolvimento das relações consumidor-marca (Festcherin, 2020; Kim, Holland & Han, 2013; Sreejesh & Roy, 2015).

Portanto, o objetivo deste estudo é descrever os impactos da Ética Percebida pelo Consumidor no processo contínuo de desenvolvimento da relação consumidor-marca, integrando os componentes atitudinais, conativos e comportamentais do RCM, identificando seus efeitos diretos, indiretos e totais.

Este estudo, portanto, contribui para pesquisas anteriores das seguintes maneiras. Em primeiro lugar, fornece uma melhor compreensão dos impactos do EPC em um modelo robusto de RCM, que por sua vez beneficiaria a teoria RCM e forneceria um modelo acionável para os profissionais (Festscherin, 2020; Sereejesh, 2014). A pesquisa sobre a interação entre comportamento ético e RCM ainda não foi registrada nos estudos e é considerada a justificativa para este estudo.

Em segundo lugar, para acadêmicos, a estrutura proposta é um pré-requisito para identificar construtos relevantes úteis para postular e testar a teoria (Blut & Wang, 2020; Sreejesh, 2014; Huntley, 2006). Para os profissionais de marketing, compreender os impactos do EPC no RCM ajudaria a promover as interações do cliente com a marca e os programas de marketing de design de forma mais eficiente e eficaz, cobrindo aspectos atitudinais e comportamentais do desenvolvimento do RCM (Sreejesh, 2014).

O artigo está estruturado da seguinte forma: na seção 2, são apresentados os fundamentos conceituais. Na seção 3, o desenvolvimento de hipóteses de pesquisa. Na seção 4, a metodologia é apresentada. Nas seções 5, 6 e 7, são apresentadas análises de dados, descobertas e discussão. Por último, as seções 8, 9 e 10 descrevem implicações gerenciais, limitações de pesquisa, direções de pesquisas futuras e conclusões.

Referencial teórico

2.1 O Consumidor e a Escolha Ética

Historicamente, o consumo ético é frequentemente visto como o comportamento de um grupo de consumidores com princípios (Shaw, 2007). Muitas definições de consumo ético

referem-se a questões ambientais (Trudel & Cotte, 2008) e reciclagem (Laroche & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001), justiça social, questões de direitos humanos e envolvimento na exploração de trabalhadores (Auger et al., 2010; Becchetti & Costantino, 2010). Além dessas questões dominantes, as definições mais amplas incluem bem-estar animal (Megicks, Memery & Williams, 2008) e iniciativas da comunidade local (Carrigan, Moraes & Leek, 2011). Por fim, a literatura associa o consumo ético com a recusa consciente de comprar produtos em relação ao comportamento das empresas (Carrigan, Szmigin & Wright, 2004). Também é importante salientar que as preocupações com marketing e ética incluem a própria conduta ética da pesquisa de mercado (Malhotra & Miller, 1998).

2.2 Comportamento Ético da Empresa e Ética Percebida pelo Consumidor (EPC)

Nos últimos anos, pesquisas de consumo sobre a percepção de práticas corporativas éticas e responsabilidade social corporativa têm sido recorrentes, geralmente com o objetivo de verificar seus impactos no desempenho empresarial e possível alavancagem de vantagem competitiva (Chabowski, Mena & Gonzalez-Padron, 2011). Os princípios éticos são relevantes não apenas para o comportamento de compra dos consumidores, mas também para a busca por informações sobre a reputação das empresas com as quais desejam se relacionar (Vitell & Muncy, 1992; Brunk, 2010). Por outro lado, um número significativo de empresas têm se esforçado para desenvolver uma reputação ética, empregando estratégias de responsabilidade social corporativa, desenvolvendo códigos de ética ou comunicando valores aos consumidores como honestidade e integridade (Czinkota, Kaufmann & Basile, 2014).

A eticidade percebida pelo consumidor é definida por Brunk e Bluemelhuber (2011) como a percepção agregada dos consumidores sobre a moralidade de um sujeito (empresa, marca, produto ou serviço). De acordo com Brunk (2011), as explicações do consumidor de EPC ilustram a aplicação simultânea de considerações deontológicas (baseadas em normas) e teleológicas (baseadas em resultados) para o julgamento ético, e a avaliação dos consumidores pode ser uma mistura de ambas as correntes da teoria ética. Nesse sentido, uma série de estudos têm sido realizados para contextualizar e explorar esse fenômeno. Brunk e Bluemelhuber (2011) realizaram pesquisas com o objetivo de explorar a natureza das percepções éticas dos consumidores. Metodologicamente, eles conduziram, pessoalmente, vinte entrevistas em profundidade com consumidores na Grã-Bretanha e na Alemanha e categorizaram as respostas em categorias principais que descrevem as dimensões das percepções de ética dos consumidores. As seis dimensões identificadas estão relacionadas a consumidores,

funcionários, meio ambiente, comunidade e economia local, comunidade no exterior e comunidade empresarial. Um segundo estudo de Brunk (2012) teve como objetivo validar uma escala EPC. Três pesquisas complementares foram realizadas utilizando técnicas qualitativas e quantitativas, culminando na especificação, conceituação e validação da escala de Ética Percebida pelo Consumidor.

Relações consumidor-marca

Segundo Blackston (1992), a relação consumidor-marca é uma extensão lógica da personalidade da marca, assemelhando-se à relação entre pessoas. Fournier (1998) sugere que o relacionamento com a marca é um vínculo emocional resultante da interação entre consumidores e marcas (Kaufmann et al., 2012). Aaker (1998) reforça esta perspectiva afirmando que “o conceito de relação entre uma marca e uma pessoa, é como o que acontece entre duas pessoas, o que abre uma perspectiva distinta sobre o modo de funcionamento (...) da marca” (pág. 159). Consequentemente, a marca conquistou um status semelhante ao humano. Nesse sentido, o fenômeno da dependência entre pessoas e marcas foi investigado com a perspectiva das relações interpessoais da literatura, em que estas se apresentam como um diálogo, recíproco e não metafórico (Berger e Luckman, 2002; Blackston, 1993).

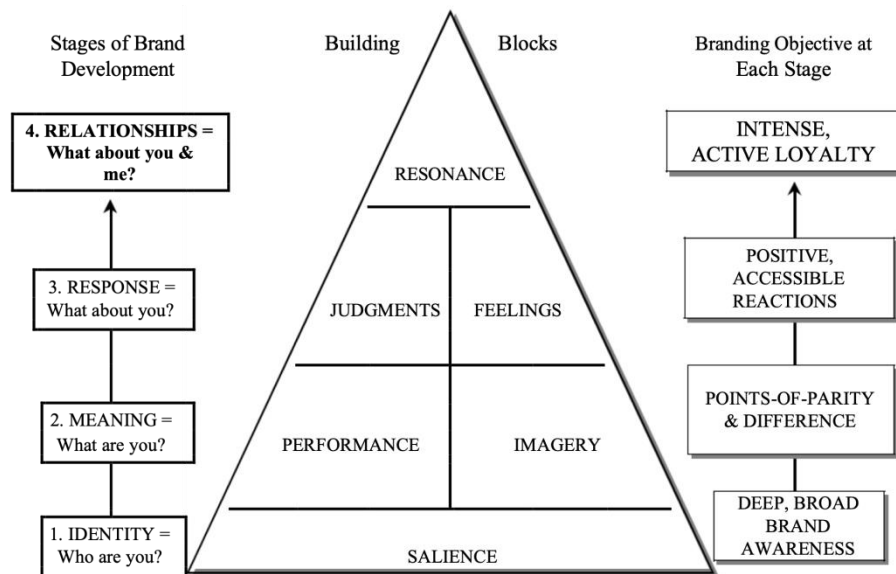
Desde a introdução do conceito e estrutura de RCM, pesquisadores e profissionais exploraram como o RCM poderia ser desenvolvido e aprimorado ao longo do tempo e quais seriam os estágios e construções envolvidas. A literatura considera, de maneira geral, alguns resultados do RCM, como fidelidade à marca, brand equity, intenção de compra e share of voice (WOM) (Fetscherin, 2020). Em relação à pesquisa existente, observamos evidências empíricas dos antecedentes do RCM como consciência da marca, confiança na marca, compromisso com a marca, apego à marca, engajamento, amor, imagem, compromisso e satisfação (Fetscherin, 2020). Os modelos que envolvem esses construtos apresentam consistências e semelhanças, porém, não estão focados nos estágios de desenvolvimento do RCM e consideram uma combinação específica de relações.

De acordo com Sreejesh (2014), esses esforços para decompor o processo contínuo de desenvolvimento de relacionamento em segmentos de crescimento gerenciáveis diferem no número de estágios que são postulados, na natureza dos processos críticos para o desenvolvimento em cada estágio e nos mecanismos que regem as transições entre estágios. Para os gestores, entender esse processo e como ele funciona e interage com a percepção do consumidor são tarefas fundamentais para o desenvolvimento de marcas fortes. Um dos

esforços preliminares para explicar o desenvolvimento do RCM foi proposto por Fournier (1998), que sugeriu que todas as interações entre a marca e os consumidores criam significados, processos de elaboração e reforço. Esses processos promovem a qualidade do relacionamento com a marca (RQM), proporcionando estabilidade e durabilidade no relacionamento.

Outra proposta clássica foi elaborada por Keller (2009). De acordo com seu modelo de desenvolvimento do valor da marca com base no cliente, existem quatro estágios para construir o valor da marca. A ressonância da marca é definida como o estágio superior do valor da marca e representa quatro relacionamentos principais que influenciam profundamente as quatro dimensões da ressonância da marca. Embora do ponto de vista de um profissional de marketing, a relação mais importante, de acordo com Keller (2009), pode ser, em última instância, entre o consumidor e a marca. O modelo de Keller é apresentado na Imagem 1:

Imagem 1 - Modelo de pirâmide de brand equity com base no cliente



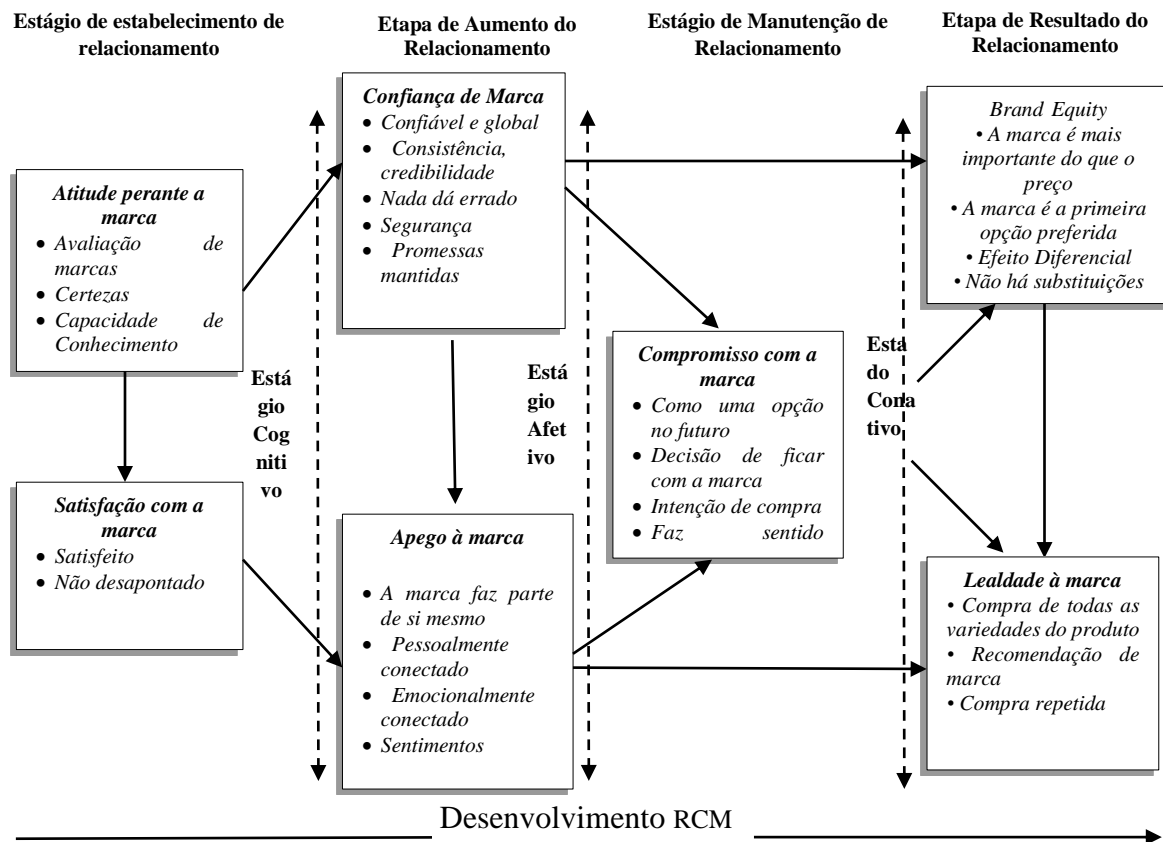
Fonte: Keller (2009).

Esse modelo apresenta semelhanças com a proposta de Oliver (1997), que sugere quatro fases de fidelidade à marca: cognitiva, afetiva, conativa e ação. Como observamos, os estágios 1 e 2 da proposta de Keller, saliência (consciência) e performance / imagética, que consiste em etapas racionais nas quais os consumidores têm contatos iniciais com as marcas (orientação cognitiva). Na etapa 3 (julgamentos e sentimentos) observamos a presença de um componente efetivo, conduzindo a atitudes conativas. A última etapa deve ser uma fase intensa de lealdade e ativa, na qual se estabelece uma relação consumidor-marca. Também foram observados

esforços consideráveis dos profissionais para definir quais seriam os estágios para desenvolver relacionamentos fortes entre o consumidor e a marca. Por exemplo, podemos citar o modelo proposto por RAKUTEN Corp. (consciência, conhecimento, confiança, paixão, fidelidade e evangelismo) e BERA (novo, namoro, amor, tédio e divórcio) (Rakuten, 2017; Fetscherin, 2020).

Sreejesh (2014) e Sreejesh & Roy (2015) elaboraram estudos utilizando uma abordagem de métodos mistos que explorou a integração de construtos atitudinais, comportamentais e conativos, com o objetivo de propor um modelo integrado de desenvolvimento de Relações Consumidor-Marca. A estrutura proposta é consistente com o modelo de lealdade de quatro estágios de Oliver, uma vez que os construtos são organizados em estágios formados sequencialmente com padrões cognitivos, afetivos, conativos e de ação (Oliver, 1997, p. 394). Na primeira fase de seu trabalho, realizou-se uma pesquisa qualitativa para compreender as dimensões da RCM, na perspectiva da Teoria Fundamentada nos Dados (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). No estágio cognitivo, os consumidores desenvolvem a força da atitude comparando a marca e suas alternativas, com base em experiências anteriores e / ou conhecimentos relacionados à oferta, atributos da marca, desempenho ou informações. O segundo estágio de desenvolvimento de RCM consiste em um afetivo, em que ocorre um aprofundamento do relacionamento. A terceira fase refere-se à manutenção do relacionamento ou fase conativa, na qual o consumidor desenvolve uma situação de compromisso com a marca, decidindo continuar com aquela marca, antecipando também uma opção de compra futura. Finalmente, os resultados do relacionamento ou fase de resultado comportamental consistiriam em brand equity, fidelidade à marca, intenção de compra e boca a boca positivo. Este modelo apresentado na Imagem 2:

Imagem 2 - Modelo Teórico - Desenvolvimento de Relações Marca-Consumidor



Source: Sreejesh&Roy (2015).

Hipóteses e desenvolvimento de modelo

Segundo Brunk e Blumelhuber (2011), uma empresa que se comporta de forma ética observa que as impressões dos consumidores sobre seus produtos e serviços podem mudar significativamente para melhor. Os consumidores valorizam a empresa como um membro responsável da sociedade, e isso pode impactar o valor da marca, a confiança, o comprometimento e o apego a ela (Brunk & Blumelhuber, 2011). Da mesma forma, para Wu e Chen (2015), os consumidores ganham confiança em uma marca quando avaliam a empresa como se comportando de forma ética. Bejou, Ennew e Palmer (1998) verificaram um impacto significativo da percepção ética sobre a confiança em serviços financeiros.

Chinomona (2013) identificou que a experiência do consumidor com a marca influencia significativa e positivamente a satisfação, a confiança e o apego à marca. Resultados semelhantes foram propostos e testados por Sreejesh (2014), que observou que as atitudes do consumidor em relação a uma marca afetam a confiança e a satisfação. De acordo com Schmalz

e Orth (2012), o apego à marca é um importante determinante das respostas do consumidor à ética praticada pela empresa. Schmalz e Orth (2012) investigaram que o apego à marca protegeria marcas de erros éticos corporativos, corroborando com as descobertas de Hupman e Zaichkowsky (1995). Além disso, Arjoon e Rambocas (2011) forneceram suporte empírico para uma relação direta positiva entre a percepção do cliente sobre a ética e a fidelidade do cliente com o compromisso com a marca atuando como um mediador. Nga & Mun (2013) elicitaram que a confiança na marca teve uma relação positiva significativa com as percepções éticas do consumidor de uma empresa. Resultados semelhantes foram obtidos por Singh, Iglesias e Foguet (2012). Derivadas dessas fontes, as seguintes hipóteses são propostas:

H01: A ética percebida pelo consumidor tem um efeito significativo na confiança na marca.

H02: A ética percebida pelo consumidor tem um efeito significativo no compromisso.

H03: A ética percebida pelo consumidor tem um efeito significativo no apego à marca.

Chiu, Huang e Yen (2010) afirmam que os consumidores, que confiam em uma marca, estão dispostos a melhorar e manter vínculos eficazes com a marca, e observaram relações entre confiança e apego à marca, conforme observado empiricamente por Sreejesh (2014) e Chinomona e Maziriri (2017). Chaudhuri e Hoolbrook (2002) compararam 107 marcas e encontraram uma relação altamente significativa entre a confiança na marca e o efeito da marca. Por outro lado, a confiança na marca é frequentemente enfatizada como um dos elementos essenciais para que os consumidores desenvolvam um senso de compromisso com esse parceiro (Bloemer & Oderkerken-Schröder, 2002; Chaudhuri & Hoolbrook, 2002). Sreejesh (2014) observou empiricamente essa relação em um modelo de relacionamento com a marca do consumidor. Nesse sentido, Morgan e Hunt (1994) propuseram que a confiança e o comprometimento são variáveis que estimulam os parceiros em um relacionamento e reduzem a percepção de risco no ambiente de mercado. Dennis et al. (2016) observaram um efeito significativo da confiança da marca no comprometimento em Instituições de Ensino Superior, reforçando sua importância.

Verificando o efeito da confiança no valor da marca no mercado de telefonia móvel, Dib's e Alhaddad's (2014) encontraram um impacto positivo significativo. Sreejesh (2014) verificou empiricamente o impacto da confiança no valor da marca em um modelo abrangente de relacionamento consumidor-marca. Nesse sentido, esses resultados são semelhantes aos achados de Jillapalli e Jillapalli (2014), com dados relativos ao ambiente acadêmico.

Além disso, na literatura de marketing, o apego é considerado um elemento essencial para o desenvolvimento da fidelidade à marca e aumento do patrimônio líquido (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Dennis et al. (2016) concluíram que o apego à marca é o principal antecedente da força da marca, afetando a satisfação, a confiança e o comprometimento, bem como o valor da marca. Por outro lado, Zhang et al. (2013) sugerem que o apego à marca tem um efeito indireto no compromisso com a marca. Park, MacInnis e Priester (2009 p.8) argumentam que o apego à marca tem uma correlação positiva com o valor da marca. Essas observações concordam com Sreejesh (2014), que examinou e verificou empiricamente essa relação. Assim, as seguintes hipóteses são propostas:

H04: A confiança na marca tem um efeito significativo no apego à marca.

H05: A confiança na marca tem um efeito significativo no compromisso com a marca.

H06: A confiança na marca tem um efeito significativo no valor da marca.

H07: O apego à marca tem um efeito significativo no compromisso com a marca.

Schmalz e Orth (2012) concluíram que o comprometimento foi identificado como um moderador dos efeitos negativos ou antiéticos da informação nas atitudes e avaliações das marcas (Rohini, Robert & Unnava, 2000; Ingram & Skinner. 2005). Níveis mais elevados de comprometimento estão geralmente associados à percepção de ganhos futuros, identificação com o parceiro, desejo limitado de buscar outros parceiros e mais investimentos feitos no relacionamento (Knapp & Taylor, 1994). Keller (1993) argumenta que a construção do brand equity se deve ao comprometimento com a marca, um achado que é confirmado empiricamente por Sreejesh (2014). Dick e Basu (1994), bem como Hess e Story (2005), argumentam que consumidores comprometidos tendem a desenvolver atitudes positivas em relação às marcas (Chaudhuri, 2006). Dennis et al. (2016) observaram um impacto significativo do comprometimento da marca no valor da marca em Instituições de Ensino Superior reforçando sua importância. Nesse sentido, Zhang (2015) observou que o brand equity pode ser alavancado por comprometimento e valor nas comunidades de consumidores online.

Por outro lado, a relação entre comprometimento com a marca e fidelidade tem sido recorrente na literatura. McAlexander, Kim e Roberts (2003) observaram empiricamente que a relação entre a experiência da marca e a lealdade à marca era mediada pelo compromisso com a marca. Iglesias et al. (2011) confirmaram que o comprometimento afetivo media a relação entre experiência de marca e lealdade. Da mesma forma, Hur et al. (2010) observaram relações entre comprometimento, lealdade e intenção de compra. Datta (2003), discutindo os

anteriores da lealdade, argumenta que o comprometimento com a marca tem efeitos positivos na retenção dos consumidores e nas recompras. Fullerton (2003, 2005a, 2005b) explorou e observou os efeitos do comprometimento na lealdade. Portanto, concluímos um dos efeitos benéficos do compromisso e lealdade refletidos em um relacionamento positivo (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001, Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Moorman et al., 1992) e hipotetizamos:

H08: O compromisso com a marca tem um efeito significativo no valor da marca.

H09: O compromisso com a marca tem um efeito significativo na fidelidade à marca.

H10: O compromisso com a marca tem um efeito significativo na intenção de compra.

Coob-Walgreen, Ruble e Donthu (1995) analisaram dois conjuntos de dados e observaram que as marcas com maior valor de marca em cada categoria de produtos geravam preferências e intenções de compra significativamente maiores. Esch, Langner e Geus (2006) verificaram os impactos da imagem e do conhecimento da marca nas intenções de compra dos consumidores. Na mesma direção, Jalilvand, Samiei e Mahdavinia (2011) observaram o efeito dos componentes do brand equity sobre a intenção de compra na indústria automobilística.

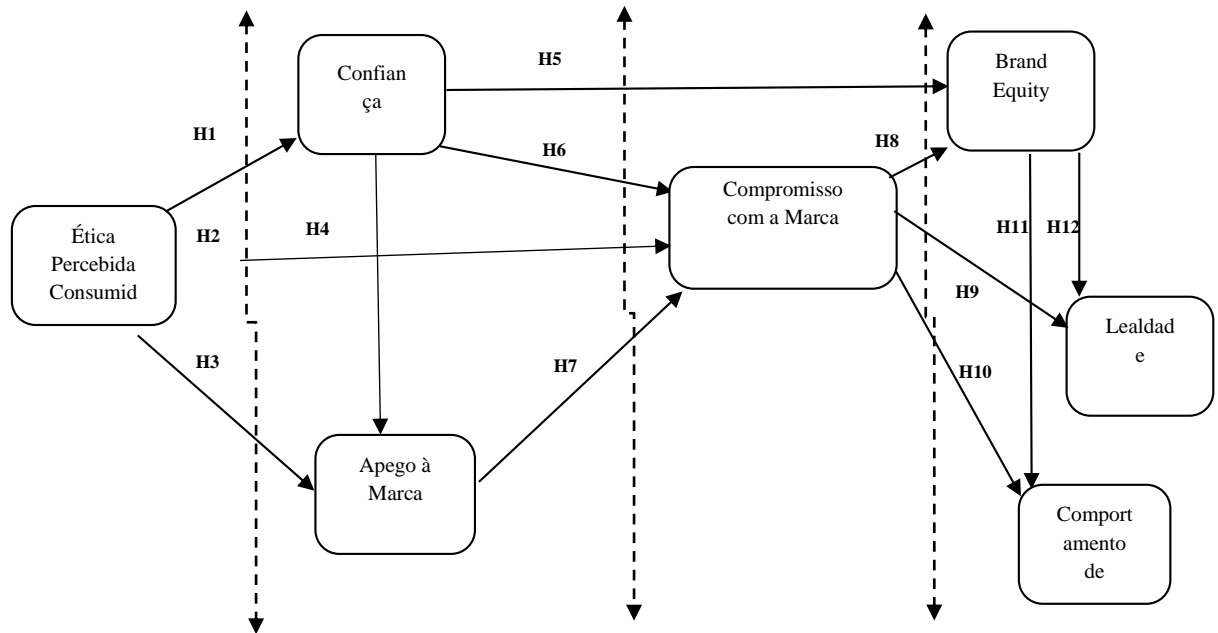
Além disso, Sreejesh (2014) verificou o impacto do valor da marca na fidelidade à marca em uma estrutura de relacionamento consumidor-marca. Dlacic e Kezman (2014) observaram empiricamente que os elementos do brand equity aumentam a fidelidade à marca do cliente no mercado farmacêutico. Nesse sentido, Taylor, Celuch e Goodwin (2004), em uma amostra nacional de clientes industriais de fabricantes de equipamentos pesados, obtiveram resultados que sugerem que o brand equity e a confiança são consistentemente os antecedentes mais relevantes para as formas comportamentais e atitudinais de lealdade do consumidor. Nesse sentido, propusemos as próximas hipóteses:

H11: O valor da marca tem um efeito significativo na intenção de compra.

H12: O valor da marca tem um efeito significativo na lealdade à marca.

Portanto, o modelo de pesquisa hipotético é apresentado na Imagem 3:

Imagem 3 - Modelo de Pesquisa Hipotético



Fonte: Autores.

Metodologia

Para cumprir os objetivos da pesquisa, foi adotada uma abordagem descritiva e quantitativa. Foi realizada uma pesquisa feita pessoalmente, com coleta de 538 questionários em março de 2017, com assistentes de pesquisa pré-treinados. Os respondentes foram estudantes de uma grande capital brasileira (Belo Horizonte, 3ª cidade em população do país) que possuíam smartphones. O questionário avaliou os EPC dos principais fabricantes de smartphones, como Apple e Samsung. A fase de pesquisa foi aplicada em ambiente de laboratório (Malhotra, 2007), e os respondentes receberam como incentivo um “vale lanche grátis”.

A tradução e validação das escalas seguiram os procedimentos recomendados por Sousa e Rojjanasirrat (2011). Primeiramente, fizemos a tradução do instrumento original para o português, utilizando tradutores bilíngues e biculturais. Em segundo lugar, foi realizada a retrotradução cega (blind backward translation) da versão traduzida inicial preliminar do instrumento. Em seguida, um painel de especialistas foi solicitado avaliar cada item do instrumento quanto à equivalência de conteúdo, durante um teste piloto da versão pré-final em português. Foi realizado um pré-teste com 15 respondentes, que relataram ter entendido as questões e descreveram corretamente sua compreensão dos itens. O teste psicométrico da

versão pré-final do instrumento traduzido foi feito com os dados da pesquisa, conforme descrito na seção 5. O questionário era composto por escalas de onze pontos multi-itens ancoradas por 10 = "concordo totalmente" e 0 = " discordo veementemente, para facilitar o tratamento como variáveis quantitativas contínuas, todas do tipo Likert (Churchill, 1979). Para operacionalizar a mensuração das variáveis, as escalas foram obtidas na literatura. Detalhes sobre os itens são apresentados no Anexo 1. As fontes e as escalas são mostradas na Tabela 1:

Tabela 1 - Escalas de Medição

Construto	Fonte	Número de Itens	Itens de Amostra
Apego à Marca	Park et al. (2010)	10	[A marca é] parte de você e quem você é
Confiança na Marca	He, Li & Harris (2012)	4	Eu confio nesta marca.
Compromisso com a Marca	Eisingerich & Rubera (2010)	4	Mesmo se [nome da marca] fosse mais difícil de comprar, continuaria comprando
Brand Equity	Yoo & Donthu (2001)	4	Prefira comprar esta marca em vez de outras marcas
Lealdade à Marca	Petzer et al. (2014)	7	Eu me considero leal a esta marca
Intenção de Compra	Long-Chuan et.al. (2014)	5	Eu consideraria comprar este produto
Ética Percebida pelo Consumidor	Brunk (2012)	6	(Empresa/marca) respeita as normas morais

Fonte: Elaborado pelos autores.

Análise de dados e resultados

Esta seção apresenta os procedimentos de análise do estudo, bem como os resultados obtidos com a aplicação da pesquisa quantitativa. A amostra foi composta por homens (52%) e mulheres (48%), com renda familiar de R \$ 2.001 a 6.000 (46%), ou superior a R \$ 9.000 (23%), com idade entre 19 e 35 anos (85 %), a idade média de 25 anos ($s = 7,9$), predominantemente nível superior incompleto (75%) e estado civil solteiro (87%). As marcas que dominaram a pesquisa são Samsung e Apple, sendo que 68,3% dos consumidores possuem essas marcas e responderam ao questionário sobre elas. A análise dos dados começou com procedimentos preliminares, como a identificação de outliers uni e multivariados, valores ausentes e verificação de premissas de linearidade, normalidade e multicolinearidade.

Para verificar a dimensionalidade das escalas, foi utilizada a Análise Fatorial Exploratória das escalas (extração por Componentes Principais e aplicação do Screeplot e critério de autovalor superior a 1). Os valores alcançados de 0,821 a 0,938 são considerados

adequados, indicando que a análise fatorial é adequada para os dados. Os resultados indicaram soluções unidimensionais em todos os casos, com comunalidades superiores a 0,500, variância explicada (Kaiser-Meyer-Olsen) considerada "muito boa" (Hair et al., 2010).

O viés do método comum foi avaliado com o teste de fator único de Harman. O EFA não girado (PCA) mostrou uma solução multifatorial e uma variância explicada do primeiro fator de 33%; esses dados, juntamente com a baixa variância intra-respondente (Hyman e Sierra, 2012), indicam que o CMB não foi um problema.

A validade das medidas foi avaliada por meio do modelo de equações simultâneas com variáveis latentes (Netemeyer, Bearden & Sharma, 2003), aplicando-se a estimativa de Partial Least Squares (PLS) (Hair et al., 2010).

Na fase de validade convergente, como sugerem Bagozzi, Yi e Phillips (1991), as cargas fatoriais dos construtos devem ser significativas ao nível de 5% ou 1% (por meio de testes unicaudais com $t = 1,65$ ou $t =$ crítico 2,33), para obtenção da convergência da validade das evidências dos construtos. As medidas de confiabilidade composta (CC), variância média extraída (VME) e alfa de Cronbach (AC) também foram calculadas. Todos os detalhes sobre os itens da escala, validade convergente e confiabilidade estão disponíveis no Apêndice 1. Para avaliar a variância compartilhada dentro dos itens dos fatores e entre os fatores, a validade discriminante das escalas foi avaliada através da variância-média extraída dos indicadores foi menor do que a variância compartilhada entre os construtos teóricos (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Os resultados demonstram que houve validade discriminante com correlações altas a moderadas entre os construtos. Os resultados são apresentados na Tabela 2:

Tabela 2 - Validade Discriminante

	Apego à Marca	Brand Equity	EPC - Eticidade	Compro misso	Lealda de	Intenção de Compra	Confiança
1. Apego à Marca	0.818						
2. Brand Equity	0.595	0.918					
3. EPC - Eticidade	0.497	0.594	0.881				
4. Compromisso	0.700	0.714	0.594	0.865			
5. Lealdade	0.739	0.798	0.573	0.847	0.889		
6. Intenção de Compra	0.620	0.775	0.621	0.817	0.831	0.874	
7. Confiança na Marca	0.440	0.546	0.686	0.585	0.525	0.604	0.908
VMR	0.669	0.843	0.777	0.749	0.790	0.784	0.824
CC	0.953	0.955	0.965	0.922	0.963	0.942	0.949
AC	0.945	0.938	0.958	0.886	0.955	0.923	0.929

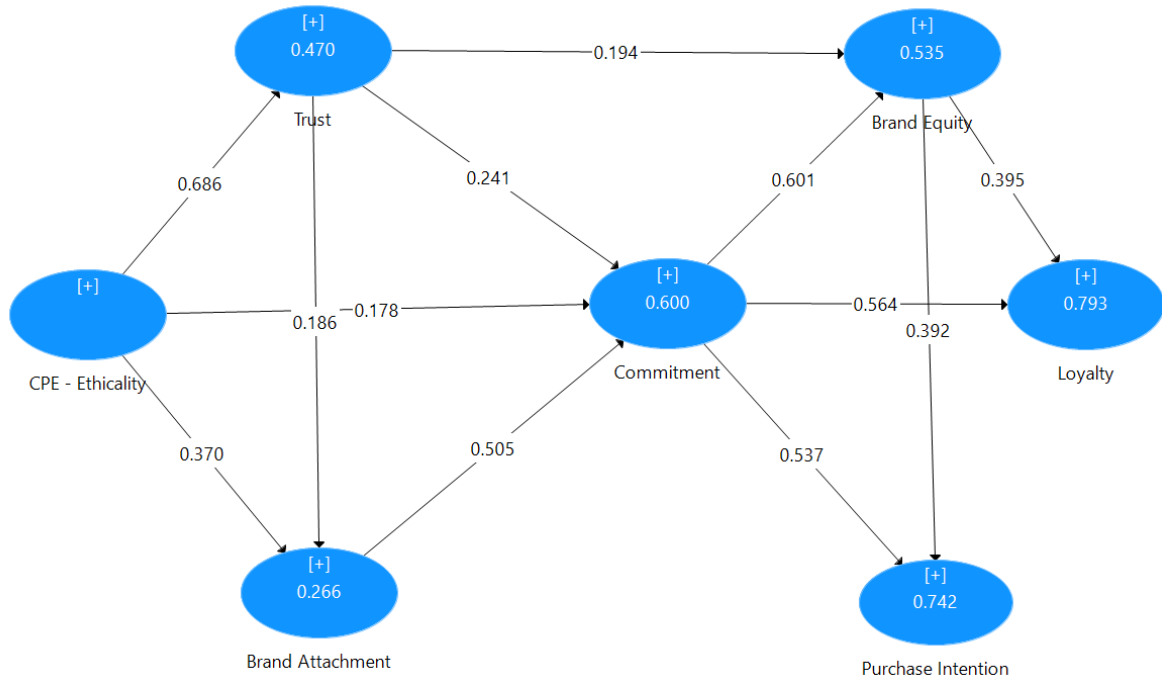
Fonte: Dados da pesquisa. Legenda: diagonal: quadrado de VMR de cada construção.
Collums: correlação dentro de construtos.

Em termos de qualidade das medidas, como os dados mostraram boa adequação, visto que a Variância Extraída Média (VME) ultrapassou 0,500 (Bollen, 1989), e as medidas de confiabilidade Alfa de Cronbach (AC) e Confiabilidade Composta (CC) ultrapassaram 0,700.

Na sequência, foi realizada a análise do modelo hipotético. Esse procedimento foi feito aplicando-se a técnica de modelagem de equações estruturais, possibilitando testar modelos de inter-relações entre construtos em uma única abordagem, considerando o impacto dos erros de medição nas estimativas. Partial Least Squares - modelagem de equações estruturais (PLS-SEM) foi aplicada para testar o modelo, pois é um método de modelagem de equações estruturais que permite estimar modelos complexos de relação causa-efeito com variáveis latentes. (Ringle 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Fornell e Larcker, 1981).

Todos os pesos das imagens são padronizados e significativos ao nível de 1%. A imagem 3 mostra os resultados para o grupo com estímulo antiético:

Figura 3 - Modelo de pesquisa



Fonte: Dados da Pesquisa.

O SRMR foi de 0,069, inferior ao limiar de 0,08 sugerido por Hu e Bentler (1999) e muito inferior a 0,10 proposto por Ringle (2015), portanto o modelo se ajusta bem ao SRMR. O intervalo de confiança do SRMR incluiu o valor original do SRMR para o modelo estimado (99%), indicando ajuste adequado. A medida de Stoner-Gleiser (Q2) indica relevância preditiva quando seu valor é maior que 1. Nesse caso, todos os construtos em ambos os modelos têm relevância preditiva. Além disso, é apresentado o valor do GoF para ambos os modelos, que está acima de 50%, indicando a capacidade preditiva geral do modelo (Vinzi, Trinchera & Amato, 2010).

Para analisar os caminhos significativos, usamos o procedimento de bootstrap que nos permitiu gerar estimativas de teste-t e significância. Os resultados da hipótese são apresentados na Tabela 4:

Tabela 4 - Teste de Hipóteses de Modelo - Coeficientes de Caminho (efeitos diretos)

Caminho	Média da amostra (M)	Desvio padrão	Estatísticas T	Valores P
Apego à Marca -> Compromisso	0.506	0.031	16.108	0.000
Brand Equity -> Lealdade	0.397	0.040	9.858	0.000
Brand Equity -> Intenção de Compra	0.395	0.039	9.972	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Apego à Marca	0.373	0.056	6.647	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Compromisso	0.180	0.046	3.898	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Confiança	0.687	0.029	23.283	0.000
Compromisso -> Brand Equity	0.600	0.037	16.156	0.000
Compromisso -> Lealdade	0.562	0.038	14.827	0.000
Compromisso -> Intenção de Compra	0.533	0.039	13.595	0.000
Confiança -> Apego à Marca	0.184	0.054	3.421	0.001
Confiança -> Brand Equity	0.195	0.042	4.649	0.000
Confiança -> Compromisso	0.238	0.042	5.747	0.000

Fonte: Dados de pesquisa. Observações: a) AMOSTRA é o peso padronizado obtido para amostra completa; b) O erro é o erro estimado da estimativa; c) O valor t é a razão do peso não padronizado pelo seu erro padrão. D) o valor de p refere-se à probabilidade de significância.

Os valores de R Square foram gerados e apresentados na Tabela 5. Como podemos verificar, o modelo possui uma boa capacidade explicativa.

Tabela 5 – R Square

Construto Endógeno	R Square	R Square Ajustado
Brand Equity	0.535	0.533
Compromisso	0.600	0.598
Lealdade	0.793	0.792
Intenção de Compra	0.742	0.741
Confiança	0.470	0.469

Fonte: Dados de Pesquisa.

Como o único objetivo da pesquisa é identificar os efeitos da EPC no desenvolvimento do MCR, todos os efeitos indiretos e totais foram medidos, e apresentados na Tabela 6. No Apêndice 2, todos os efeitos indiretos também são descritos, pois revelam todos os caminhos medidos.

Tabela 6 – Efeitos Totais (direto + indireto)

Caminho	Média da amostra (M)	Desvio padrão	Estatísticas T	Valores P
Apego à Marca -> Brand Equity	0.304	0.029	10.389	0.000
Apego à Marca -> Compromisso	0.506	0.031	16.108	0.000
Apego à Marca -> Lealdade	0.405	0.030	13.346	0.000
Apego à Marca -> Intenção de Compra	0.390	0.029	13.529	0.000
Brand Equity -> Lealdade	0.397	0.040	9.858	0.000
Brand Equity -> Intenção de Compra	0.395	0.039	9.972	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Apego à Marca	0.500	0.032	15.438	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Brand Equity	0.493	0.031	15.990	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Compromisso	0.597	0.033	17.760	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Lealdade	0.531	0.030	17.558	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Intenção de Compra	0.513	0.031	16.677	0.000
EPC - Eticidade -> Confiança	0.687	0.029	23.283	0.000
Compromisso -> Brand Equity	0.600	0.037	16.156	0.000
Compromisso -> Lealdade	0.800	0.024	33.900	0.000
Compromisso -> Intenção de Compra	0.770	0.026	29.561	0.000
Confiança -> Apego à Marca	0.184	0.054	3.421	0.001
Confiança -> Brand Equity	0.393	0.043	9.123	0.000
Confiança -> Compromisso	0.331	0.053	6.311	0.000
Confiança -> Lealdade	0.342	0.044	7.911	0.000
Confiança -> Intenção de Compra	0.333	0.042	7.923	0.000

Fonte: Dados de pesquisa. Observações: a) AMOSTRA é o peso padronizado obtido para amostra completa; b) O erro é o erro estimado da estimativa; c) O valor t é a razão do peso não padronizado pelo seu erro padrão. D) o valor de p refere-se à probabilidade de significância.

Nas próximas seções, essas descobertas são descritas e discutidas.

Descobertas

Os resultados mostram que a confiança na marca é o construto mais afetado na cadeia nomológica pela percepção da ética, o que comprova a teoria proposta por Brunk e Blumelhuber (2011). Também é relevante e central o efeito do comprometimento com a marca (estágio conativo) em todos os resultados (lealdade, compra e patrimônio), com pesos variando de 0,533 a 0,600, o que indica a preocupação dos consumidores com o comportamento ético das organizações (Chinomona, 2013; Wu & Chen, 2015). Considerando os construtos mediadores

do modelo de desenvolvimento de RCM, podemos observar que o apego à marca ($\beta = 0,50$) é mais relevante do que a confiança na marca ($\beta = 0,308$), no que se refere ao reforço de comprometimento. Esses resultados demonstram o quão relevantes são as conexões emocionais com as marcas, para potencializar os comportamentos conativos, validando as afirmações descritas na literatura (Bloemer & Oderkerken-Schröder, 2002; Chaudhuri & Hoolbrook, 2002). Os dados sugerem que marcas que criam laços emocionais e são mais auto-conectadas podem atingir níveis mais elevados de comprometimento do que marcas que são apenas “confiáveis e seguras”, sugerindo que o apego à marca pode proporcionar uma vantagem competitiva às marcas. Esse resultado indica que o valor da marca é influenciado pelo comprometimento, corroborando as afirmações de Zhang (2015).

De acordo com a Tabela 4, todos os caminhos do modelo são significativos ao nível de $p < 0,01$, demonstrando que este framework de desenvolvimento de RCM apresenta consistência, conforme sugerido por Fetscherin (2020) e Sreejesh (2014). Em relação aos efeitos da percepção da ética na RCM, a análise da Tabela 6 fornece percepções relevantes. Em primeiro lugar, todos os efeitos totais do EPC em todos os construtos em que possui efeitos diretos e indiretos, são superiores a 0,493, fato que sugere um papel central do EPC no desenvolvimento do RCM e gestão da marca. Em segundo lugar, considerando os construtos que medeiam o modelo, o EPC impulsiona todos eles: compromisso com a marca ($\beta = 0,597$), apego à marca ($\beta = 0,500$) e confiança na marca ($\beta = 0,687$). Portanto, o EPC poderia ajudar os consumidores a fornecer propósito e significado às marcas, que consiste em aspectos que estão crescendo em importância no campo (Renshaw, 2019; Sinek, 2009).

Por fim, os resultados revelam que uma ética percebida é capaz de impactar significativa e fortemente os resultados da marca, pois apresenta pesos como $\beta = 0,531$ na fidelidade à marca, $\beta = 0,513$ na intenção de compra e $\beta = 0,493$ no valor da marca (efeitos totais). Esses resultados corroboram a literatura que indica que as percepções dos consumidores sobre o comportamento ético podem influenciar as percepções sobre produtos e serviços (Brunk & Blumelhuber, 2011), melhorar a lealdade à marca (Chiomona, 2013; Wu & Chen, 2015), influenciar positivamente a confiança (Ennew & Palmer, 1998; Sreejesh, 2014), bem como influenciar o comprometimento com a marca (Arjoon & Rambocas, 2011).

Discussão

O objetivo desta pesquisa foi investigar e pesquisar sobre o impacto da ética percebida pelo consumidor (EPC) no desenvolvimento das relações consumidor-marca (RCM). Um

modelo abrangente foi testado, tendo o EPC como condutor de um modelo hipotético de mediação e suas consequências. O modelo apresentado foi capaz de apresentar uma capacidade significativa de explicação dos resultados da marca.

De acordo com os resultados, o EPC tem efeitos significativos ($> 0,49$) em todos os construtos do modelo de desenvolvimento do RCM. Isso significa que o EPC é uma passagem de entrada para o desenvolvimento do relacionamento com os consumidores. Como os impactos são os construtos e resultados da mediação, conduza a conclusões consistentes sobre a relevância do EPC para as gerações mais jovens.

Nos últimos anos, essas coortes observaram rápidas mudanças nos ecossistemas ambientais, políticos e empresariais, e passaram pela pandemia COVID 19. Também perceberam diferentes comportamentos das empresas nesses cenários, pois um número relevante delas realizava ações para ajudar e contribuir com instituições de assistência à saúde, doava medicamentos e alimentava grupos vulneráveis, fatos que estão ligados a uma mentalidade que vem ganhando adesão em todo o mundo. No futuro, é possível que esse “efeito ético-autocongruente” (marca-consumidor) seja ainda mais relevante para uma gestão eficaz da marca.

Implicações gerenciais

Através de uma perspectiva gerencial, esta pesquisa oferece implicações interessantes. Resultados obtidos com o propósito das empresas devem dedicar seus esforços para gerar uma percepção de ética, que traga resultados relevantes para a marca. A seguir, apresentaremos algumas implicações gerenciais relacionadas a resultados específicos. Primeiro, a pesquisa demonstrou como a ética percebida é relevante para aumentar a confiança na marca. De acordo com os resultados, a confiança impacta o valor da marca e a fidelidade à marca, dois importantes motores de lucro. Nesse sentido, os gestores devem ter cuidado especial na gestão do EPC, realizar pesquisas de consumo para medir as percepções éticas do consumidor e criar ações que fomentem o nível do EPC, caso contrário a confiança da marca dificilmente seria afetada.

Em segundo lugar, os gerentes devem estar cientes de como o apego à marca impulsiona o comprometimento em uma cadeia nomológica de desenvolvimento de RCM. Os resultados sugerem que um plano para aumentar o EPC deve aproveitar as atividades de comunicação e construção de marca que podem criar auto-conexão e vínculos emocionais com os consumidores.

Por outro lado, o compromisso com a marca demonstrou ser central para o desenvolvimento de RCM, integrado com EPC. O comprometimento tende a ser um construto mais estável e medeia as relações no modelo, com alto impacto em todos os resultados, com maior intensidade no valor da marca (Bloemer & Oderkerken-Schröder, 2002; Chaudhuri & Hoolbrook, 2002). Nesse sentido, como o brand equity diferencia e agrega valor a um produto genérico, pois cria vantagem competitiva e impacta positivamente na escolha, faz sentido investimentos para forjar comprometimento, e o EPC é um aspecto a ser considerado nesse processo.

Por fim, os gestores devem estar cientes de que o EPC potencializa todos os resultados do modelo de desenvolvimento da marca. Recentemente, foram observados sérios esforços dos fabricantes (inclusive de smartphones), de planejamento e implantação de estratégias que se relacionam a valores éticos, causas sociais, saúde e bem-estar de colaboradores, clientes e comunidades. Essas ações estiveram mais presentes e com maior intensidade nos últimos meses, possivelmente devido à pandemia de COVID 19. Os resultados desta pesquisa sugerem que essas marcas desenvolvam resultados positivos, à medida que seu EPC cresceria, pois é um elemento relevante para criar valor, propósito e inspiração para consumidores, empresas e suas marcas (Renshaw, 2019; Sinek, 2009).

Limitações e pesquisas futuras

Esta pesquisa não está isenta de limitações, o que pode estimular novas investigações. Em primeiro lugar, os resultados vêm de uma amostra única de estudo de design transversal, que envolve a ética percebida pelo consumidor e a estrutura de desenvolvimento de RCM. Em segundo lugar, os resultados sugerem outras áreas de pesquisa relativas ao estudo de EPC para desenvolver RCM. Assim, uma área de pesquisa futura envolve a aplicação deste modelo em diferentes contextos, como empresas de serviços e varejistas, considerando a origem local e global da empresa.

Uma terceira área para pesquisas futuras diz respeito a verificar se a qualidade do relacionamento com a marca (QRM; Fournier, 1998; Fetscherin, 2020) poderia moderar os efeitos do RCM no modelo. Por fim, sugere-se integrar mais construtos relacionados à teoria clássica do relacionamento com a marca, como o amor à marca, no modelo desta pesquisa, para aumentar sua capacidade de compreensão e interpretação do fenômeno.

Conclusão

Esta pesquisa estende o estudo da ética percebida pelo consumidor, testando um modelo que considera o EPC como um impulsionador relevante do desenvolvimento de RCM. Os resultados comprovam essa influência significativa e demonstram a existência de moderadores relevantes que interagem para promover os resultados da marca. Portanto, este estudo enfatiza e descreve o papel da ética percebida pelo consumidor e seus impactos no desenvolvimento de RCM.

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