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The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility and Business Ethics on Brand Fidelity: The Importance of Brand Love and Brand Attitude

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Abstract: Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business ethics are perceived as distinct constructs by the consumer, although research from this perspective is scarce. Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate the impact of CSR and business ethics on brand fidelity. A theoretical review of CSR, business ethics, brand attitude, brand love, and brand fidelity was undertaken. From these constructs, a theoretical model was proposed, conducting an empirical study with a sample of 559 North American respondents. Through the statistical treatment of data with PLS-SEM, it was demonstrated that business ethics and CSR exert an indirect positive effect on brand fidelity, with relationships mediated by brand love. In turn, brand attitude exerts an indirect effect on brand fidelity, through the mediation of brand love. Based on the results, this study contributes to the approach of CSR and business ethics as distinct constructs and to the consolidation of the brand fidelity construct and its relationships. For management, this study helps organizations to perceive CSR and business ethics as important allies in a brand's strategy. We conclude that although CSR remains important, customers value business ethics as a critical factor in their perceptions of the brand, contributing more strongly to brand fidelity.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; business ethics; brand fidelity; brand love; brand attitude

1. Introduction

Throughout history, the world has faced major social and humanitarian challenges, which have political, economic and social consequences, requiring adequate responses not only from governments, but from society as a whole, individuals and organizations [1,2].

Based on this premise, consumers have increasingly come to expect different positions from organizations, in order to overcome the hermetic logic of profitability and demonstrate greater commitment to and investment in social issues [3]. The stakeholder theory [4] responds to this expectation of consumers by highlighting the responsibility of organizations towards their different stakeholders, helping executives to reflect on value creation practices and their contribution to the well-being of the society [1,5,6]. It is in this context that the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business ethics emerges [7–9].

CSR and business ethics have been gaining ground and credibility as they are, respectively, socially responsible activities and ethical behavior, developed by companies towards their stakeholders, in order to maximize economic, social and environmental well-being, and generate value for themselves [9–13].

The relevance of CSR and business ethics lies in the fact that it is a means by which organizations have the ability to improve profitability, become more sustainable, differenti-

ate themselves through their values, fulfill their obligations to society [13–18] and develop positive attitudes in their target audience [19,20].

Thus, another important factor of relevance to the theme refers to the effects of CSR activities and business ethics on consumer behavior [9,19,21], as well as their impact on brand strategies [13,22]. Some studies argue that the positive evaluations and behaviors of consumers in relation to companies are based on their perceptions when they see that organizations are holders of values and ethical conduct [9,13], and that they have social responsibility in their business initiatives [14,23,24].

Thus, there is an interest of companies in implementing SR activities due to favorable results in their business, namely, an improvement in the company's reputation, the achievement of a competitive advantage, and an increase in value creation [25]. However, there are still few studies that address CSR and business ethics as distinct constructs, investigating, together, the influence of these variables in the field of marketing [9].

The literature shows that academics have not yet come to a consensus on the concepts of CSR and business ethics. For some, the two concepts are seen as overlapping, while for others, they are understood as two different variables [9,18,26–31]. Ferrell et al. [9] demonstrated, in their research, that CSR and business ethics are perceived as different constructs by the consumer, showing that consumers react differently to each of these constructs.

Furthermore, the impact of CSR and business ethics on brand fidelity, a variable recently developed and validated by Grace et al. [32], was not investigated. These questions presented in the literature led to the following reflection in this study: will brands perceived as socially responsible and ethical have more loyal consumers? Therefore, this research aims to investigate the influence of corporate social responsibility and business ethics on brand fidelity.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Stakeholder Theory

The stakeholder theory considers that companies must have a comprehensive view and go beyond actions aimed at enhancing the profitability of investors, while also focusing on the interests of other parties that exert direct or indirect influences on organizations [1,33].

Although companies are not obliged to act ethically and morally towards the population, these attitudes are still expected [12,34]. Responding positively to these concerns of interested parties can be very beneficial for companies and can enhance their wealth in general [35,36]. With society's growing concern about ethical and social responsibility issues, the stakeholder theory represents an approach to the role of organizations in meeting social and collective concerns [37,38].

Given the complexity involved in CSR and business ethics practices, stakeholder theory can contribute by promoting a better assessment that analyzes the company's relationship management with its stakeholders [39–41]. The various actors that make up the stakeholders have a fundamental role in generating wealth for companies and in their development, being the same ones who benefit from what the organization produces [42,43].

2.2. Corporate Social Responsibility

Sen et al. (p. 70, [10]) defined corporate social responsibility as "a firm's or brand's commitment to maximize long-term economic, societal, and environmental well-being through business practices, policies, and resources". The European Commission (p. 4, [44]) defines CSR as "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns into their business activities and their interaction with stakeholders on a voluntary basis". These CSR concepts clearly integrate social and environmental issues.

These activities attract the attention of managers, as they realize that the results of these actions bring many advantages for organizations [36]. Thus, there are some studies that have suggested the importance of these practices in organizations, as customers support companies that are socially responsible [45–47], and that these efforts are seen as acts of

zeal and kindness that are evident to all interested parties, not just to the group destined to receive such benefits [48].

It is essential to emphasize that consumer perceptions have a significant influence on brand choice [49]. Bearing in mind that consumers are increasingly informed, it is important to emphasize that they realize the impact that SR activities can have on their lives, and they want to see organizations adhere to and defend this awareness [50].

Therefore, organizations that aspire to elevate their reputation, increase their business performance, strengthen ties with their target audience and solidify an attractive image to consumers should adopt CSR practices, as well as communicate such adhesions to their audience [51].

2.3. Business Ethics

Currently, we live in a society in which people have easy access to information, being fully interconnected in an increasingly transparent world. Throughout these changes, consumers have longed to see brands that integrate ethical values [52–54].

Lewis [55] presents in his research the different meanings that the term "ethics" can have, namely: (1) a general standard or way of life, (2) a set of rules of conduct or moral code, and (3) an investigation of ways of life and rules of conduct, understanding that a moral code is formed from the set of principles and values of the individual.

Companies that aim to have strong and solid brands must incorporate ethics as an essential point of business [56,57], as well as showing their target audience, through their constant interactions, how the brand has worked and approached ethics [57,58]. This means developing and demonstrating ethical actions at all points of contact between the consumer and the organization.

Consumers' perceptions of a company's ethics are an essential factor, as they exert an influence on their behavioral intentions, thus directing them to make certain decisions [59]. Business ethics has the power to positively influence consumers, as there is a good relationship between customers' perceptions of business ethics and their preferences for the company's products [47].

Following this, there is other research that shows that ethical consumption values play a significant role in customer evaluations regarding the brand/company [60]. More specifically, companies with ethical values can benefit from many positive consequences, as they exert a significant influence on the quality of the company's products and services, advertising, the relationship between company and customer, society, and the environment [61].

2.4. Brand Love

The concept of brand love has evolved and shown its relevance in the customer–brand relationship, thus becoming present in the brand management area [62]. Brand love is about a unique emotional attitude, defined as the degree of passionate emotional attachment a person has to a specific business name [63]. As it results from the construction of marketing, this construct is a valuable instrument that helps us to better understand consumer behavior, and its changes and directions in the expected post-consumption period [63].

Consumers do not bond or develop strong relationships with brands quickly. For this, a long-term relationship is needed, experienced between the consumer and the brand [64]. Thus, the relevance of a brand depends on the time the customers spend consuming products or services, as well as how much they think about it [65,66].

It is important to plan marketing strategies that go in search of a deep relationship with the customer [67]. Consequently, when marketers meet deep consumer values, they tend to influence them to experience a relationship of love for the brand [65].

In this context, CSR can strongly contribute to brand love, as several surveys have suggested that CSR is part of brand building, and that it strongly influences brand loyalty and the relationship between customer and brand [68]. There is also evidence to show that customer perceptions of CSR practices influence brand passion [20] and brand love [69,70].

As such, based on the literature presented, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *General perceptions of corporate social responsibility directly and positively influence brand love.*

Furthermore, it is important to know what the predictors of customer engagement with the brand are. In relation to this theme, Bezençon e Blili [71] contribute, in their research, to the relationship between ethics and involvement, and show that ethical products, in fact, influence customer involvement with the brand.

When consumers perceive ethical behavior on the part of the brand, they immediately link it to their own values, thus creating a strong connection and identification with the brand, as well as greater involvement and commitment [72–74]. Kim et al. [75] also suggest that the company's pro-social and ethical actions generate brand love and the involvement of consumers with the brand.

Following the relationships presented in the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *General perceptions of business ethics directly and positively influence brand love.*

2.5. Brand Attitude

Brand attitude refers to a global assessment of the brand, made by the consumer [76], which, in turn, stems from their beliefs and feelings regarding the characteristics and benefits of the brand [77]. Brand attitude is of fundamental importance, as its consequences impact brand evaluation [78]. Thus, it can be said that brand attitude reflects the level of sympathy of a brand, and can also be expressed through a positive view of the consumer [79].

It was demonstrated that there is a relationship between CSR and brand attitude, as well as purchase intention, perceived quality and brand image [24,80]. CSR activities are linked to consequences, such as consumer attitudes and behaviors [81–83].

Therefore, as supported by the literature, the following hypothesis is presented:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *General perceptions of CSR directly and positively influence brand attitude.*

Ethical behavior also has a significant effect on consumer attitudes and behaviors [81–83]. In the field of the relationship between customer and brand, it has been shown that when customers perceive that a company engages in ethical behavior, consumers tend to respond more positively to brands, given these perceptions [47,53]. Consequently, the consumer's response is essential to understanding the relationship between the ethics perceived by consumers and their attitudes towards the brand, as well as their purchasing behavior [84]. As a consequence, there is a greater preference on the part of customers to consume products/services from pro-social companies [85].

Ferrell et al. [9] also showed, in their research, that business ethics has a greater influence on brand attitude than CSR. There is also research showing that affection becomes a dimension of consumer attitude when the consumers realize that a brand has ethical behavior [72,86].

Thus, following the literature described, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *General perceptions of business ethics directly and positively influence brand attitude.*

The study by Grace et al. [32] shows that brand attitude, benefits and brand attributes establish the foundation on which the consumer–brand relationship is built. Its conceptual model demonstrates that brand attitude is an important predictor of brand love.

As such, the following hypothesis is presented:

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Brand attitude directly and positively influences brand love.*

2.6. Brand Fidelity

In order to have strong relationships between the consumer and the brand, essential elements are taken into account, such as the durability, stability and exclusivity of the relationships [87–89]. In this sense, Grace et al. [90] propose the definition of a new construct in the field of investigation of the consumer–brand relationship—brand fidelity, a multidimensional variable developed and validated in the study by Grace et al. [32].

Brand fidelity is defined as the consumer's devotion to a brand, demonstrated by a set of behaviors (i.e., accommodation/forgiveness—performance and price) and cognitions (i.e., derogation of alternatives and cognitive interdependence) that maintain relationship stability and durability [32,90].

Brand fidelity is a construct that is divided into two categories, namely, behavioral manifestations and cognitive manifestations, comprising four dimensions, conceptualized by Grace et al. [32]: accommodation/forgiveness (performance), which is the degree to which a consumer forgives and supports a brand in times of performance variations; accommodation/forgiveness (price), which is the extent to which a consumer forgives and supports a brand in times of price fluctuations; cognitive interdependence, which is the degree to which a consumer feels in harmony with the brand and assumes personal ownership of the brand, and derogation of alternatives, which is the extent to which a consumer focuses on the strengths of the brand and the weaknesses of its competitors.

It is known that brand fidelity is directly and positively influenced by brand love, according to previous research by Grace et al. [32], and this relationship was later confirmed in the empirical study by Joshi and Garg [91]. This leads this study to adopt the position that consumers who love a brand more will tend to be more loyal to that brand.

From recent studies on brand fidelity, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 6 (H6). *Brand love directly and positively influences brand fidelity.*

2.7. Research Model

The proposed research model is represented in Figure 1, containing five constructs and six hypotheses.
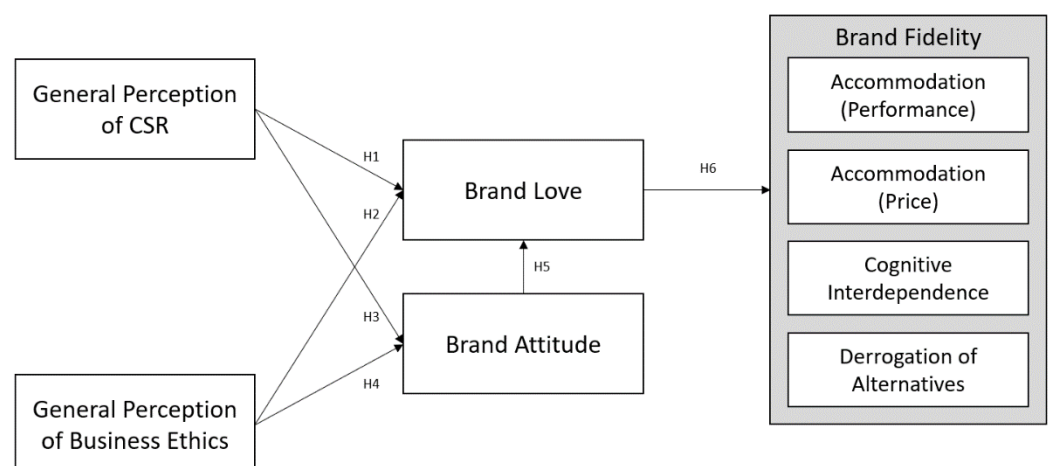
Figure 1. Research model.

The definitions and sources of all constructs used in the research model are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Constructs of the research model.

Construct	Definition	References
General perception of CSR	Perception about the commitment of a company or a brand to maximizing long-term economic, social, and environmental well-being through business practices, policies and resources.	Sen et al. [10]
General perception of business ethics	Perception about the principles and standards that guide business behavior.	Ferrell et al. [92]
Brand love	Degree of passionate emotional attachment that a satisfied consumer has to a particular brand.	Carroll and Ahuvia [63]
Brand attitude	Relatively long-lasting, one-dimensional summary assessment of a brand that presumably encourages behavior.	Spears and Singh [93]
Brand fidelity	A set of behaviors and cognitions that maintain the stability and durability of the consumer–brand relationship.	Grace et al. [32]

All hypotheses of the research model are summarized in Table 2, indicating the theoretical support that justified each relationship.

Table 2. Research model hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Independent Variable		Dependent Variable	Signal	References
H1	General perceptions of CSR	→	Brand love	Positive	Baena [69]; Gilal et al. [17]; Rodrigues et al. [70]
H2	General perceptions of business ethics	→	Brand love	Positive	Kim et al. [69]; Singh et al. [72]
H3	General perceptions of CSR	→	Brand attitude	Positive	Ramesh et al. [24]; Rivera et al. [80]
H4	General perceptions of business ethics	→	Brand attitude	Positive	Ferrell et al. [9]; Shea [86]; Singh et al. [72]
H5	Brand attitude	→	Brand love	Positive	Grace et al. [32]
H6	Brand love	→	Brand fidelity	Positive	Grace et al. [32]; Joshi & Garg [91]

3. Methodology

The PLS-SEM methodology is increasingly used in studies in different areas to test, explain and predict measurement models [94]. Following trends in the use of online resources for the application of scientific research, this study adopts the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform for sample recruitment. MTurk is an internet-based job market that has been widely used for behavioral research [95]. Regarding the quality of the responses in psychological terms, the MTurk data are psychometrically solid, suggesting that the data are of good quality [96]. MTurk also contains a broader sample of the working population than traditional student (applied in higher education institutions) or community samples [96]. The existence of online platforms such as MTurk makes it possible to distribute and collect reasonable amounts of data quickly, easily and cheaply [97,98].

3.1. Data and Sample Collection

Using MTurk, a pre-test was conducted on 3 January 2021, which involved applying the survey to a sample of 31 people. A statistical analysis was performed, which

demonstrated the reliability of the scales, using Cronbach's Alpha and unidimensionality. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test, Bartlett's sphericity test and explained variance were evaluated.

Subsequently, between 7 and 11 January 2021, data were collected with the application of the survey, through the MTurk platform, to a sample consisting of 559 individuals aged 18 or over and residing in the United States of America.

As for the demographic profile of the sample, most respondents were female (58.3%), were between 30 and 39 years old (33.1%), were married or lived in a common-law marriage (59.9%), were part-time or full-time employees (76.1%), had completed a degree (49.4%) and had an annual net income between USD 25,000 and USD 49,999 (30.1%) in the US working class. The sociodemographic profiles of the respondents in this research can be found in Table A1 in Appendix A.

3.2. Masuring Instruments

The instrument to collect the data was built considering the scales of the constructs defined in the literature review, adding questions to obtain demographic data. The survey contains 46 questions and uses a 7-point Likert scale to measure most of the variables, except for those referring to the "brand attitude" construct, which uses a 7-point semantic differential scale.

The general perceptions of CSR construct is measured using a 9-item scale developed by Ferrell et al. [9]. An 8-item scale, also developed by Ferrell et al. [9], is used to assess the general perceptions of business ethics construct. The brand love construct is measured by a 5-item scale developed by Huang [99]. Brand attitude is assessed using a 4-item semantic differential scale developed by Wagner et al. [100]. Finally, brand fidelity is evaluated using a 20-item scale, divided into 4 dimensions, developed and validated by Grace et al. [32].

The scales used in this research can be found in Table A2 of Appendix B.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model Analysis

4.1.1. Multicollinearity Analysis

In order to test whether one or more independent variables are redundant, and whether this redundancy inflates the estimation of parameter variances [101], a VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) analysis was performed (Table 3). The VIF values ranged between 1.636 and 3.107, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity. The multicollinearity problem exists when the VIF values are greater than 5, and they should ideally be less than or close to 3 [102].

Table 3. Variance inflation factor, loadings, and cross-loadings.

Items	VIF	Loadings	Loadings *p*-Values	Cross-Loadings
AF_PER1	2.403	0.863	<0.001	[0.278; 0.619]
AF_PER2	2.725	0.891	<0.001	[0.308; 0.684]
AF_PER3	2.544	0.874	<0.001	[0.359; 0.626]
AF_PER4	2.438	0.862	<0.001	[0.374; 0.599]
AF_PRI1	2.084	0.822	<0.001	[0.347; 0.509]
AF_PRI2	2.149	0.855	<0.001	[0.272; 0.525]
AF_PRI3	2.252	0.862	<0.001	[0.318; 0.587]
AF_PRI4	1.636	0.785	<0.001	[0.132; 0.557]
BA1	2.860	0.902	<0.001	[0.303; 0.678]
BA2	2.368	0.863	<0.001	[0.253; 0.608]
BA3	2.460	0.864	<0.001	[0.257; 0.599]
BA4	2.585	0.875	<0.001	[0.269; 0.576]

Table 3. *Cont.*

Items	VIF	Loadings	Loadings *p*-Values	Cross-Loadings
BE1	1.874	0.757	<0.001	[0.323; 0.637]
BE2	1.857	0.726	<0.001	[0.250; 0.482]
BE3	2.458	0.803	<0.001	[0.281; 0.531]
BE4	2.216	0.774	<0.001	[0.261; 0.542]
BE5	2.775	0.816	<0.001	[0.311; 0.650]
BE6	2.519	0.802	<0.001	[0.291; 0.513]
BE7	2.136	0.768	<0.001	[0.370; 0.649]
BE8	2.749	0.808	<0.001	[0.362; 0.658]
BL1	2.761	0.860	<0.001	[0.388; 0.665]
BL2	3.032	0.881	<0.001	[0.382; 0.638]
BL3	3.103	0.887	<0.001	[0.461; 0.624]
BL4	2.942	0.873	<0.001	[0.435; 0.606]
BL5	2.699	0.860	<0.001	[0.412; 0.569]
CI1	2.310	0.807	<0.001	[0.321; 0.659]
CI2	2.393	0.805	<0.001	[0.432; 0.659]
CI3	2.149	0.806	<0.001	[0.129; 0.748]
CI4	2.386	0.831	<0.001	[0.280; 0.674]
CI5	2.420	0.832	<0.001	[0.338; 0.677]
CI6	1.918	0.764	<0.001	[0.146; 0.677]
CSR1	2.163	0.785	<0.001	[0.382; 0.572]
CSR2	2.470	0.804	<0.001	[0.335; 0.587]
CSR3	3.082	0.830	<0.001	[0.341; 0.594]
CSR4	2.675	0.822	<0.001	[0.323; 0.603]
CSR5	2.356	0.807	<0.001	[0.320; 0.623]
CSR6	2.391	0.805	<0.001	[0.330; 0.587]
CSR7	2.035	0.751	<0.001	[0.352; 0.580]
CSR8	2.945	0.820	<0.001	[0.303; 0.576]
CSR9	2.467	0.805	<0.001	[0.327; 0.588]
DA1	2.433	0.834	<0.001	[0.297; 0.659]
DA2	2.069	0.791	<0.001	[0.407; 0.725]
DA3	3.107	0.880	<0.001	[0.278; 0.709]
DA4	2.450	0.829	<0.001	[0.146; 0.656]
DA5	1.909	0.763	<0.001	[0.152; 0.657]
DA6	2.425	0.842	<0.001	[0.236; 0.733]

4.1.2. Measurement Model Reliability Analysis

To examine the reliability of the items, the loadings and *p*-value were analyzed (Table 3). This analysis serves to assess how much each item explains the latent variable to which it is assigned, with 0.7 being the minimum recommended value for loading [103]. The results obtained indicate loadings of all items above 0.7, statistically significant at the level of 0.1% (*p*-values < 0.001), proving the reliability of the items.

For the analysis of the reliability of the second-order construct, the values of the coefficients of the structural model should be considered, with 0.7 being the minimum recommended value [104]. From the results presented in Table 4, it is possible to observe that the coefficients of the structural model are greater than 0.7 and are also statistically significant at the level of 0.1% (*p*-values < 0.001). Therefore, the reliability of the second-order construct is proven.

The composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha (Table 5) were used to analyze whether the scales that measure the constructs are reliable. Regarding composite reliability (CR), all values ranged between 0.900 and 0.942, being therefore above the minimum recommended value of 0.7 [102]. The values obtained for Cronbach's Alpha ranged between 0.851 and 0.931, being higher than the minimum recommended level of 0.7 [102]. From the data presented, it is possible to affirm that all scales have adequate reliability.

Table 4. Reliability of the second-order construct.

	Structural Model Coefficients	*p*-Values
BF → AF_PER	0.864	<0.001
BF → AF_PRI	0.773	<0.001
BF → CI	0.930	<0.001
BF → DA	0.914	<0.001

Table 5. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and average variance extracted.

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
AF_PER	0.896	0.927	0.761
AF_PRI	0.851	0.900	0.692
BA	0.899	0.930	0.767
BE	0.910	0.927	0.612
BL	0.921	0.941	0.761
CI	0.893	0.918	0.652
CSR	0.931	0.942	0.646
DA	0.905	0.927	0.679
BF *	0.954	0.958	0.535

* Note: BF is a second-order construct.

4.1.3. Measurement Model: Analysis of the Convergent Validity

The AVE was calculated regarding the convergent validity (Table 5), which determines when the items that constitute the construct present positive and high correlations with each other [101]. An acceptable AVE must be equal to or greater than 0.50, indicating that the construct explains at least 50% of the variance of its items [102]. All AVE values were above the minimum value of 0.5, ranging between 0.535 and 0.767. Thus, it is demonstrated that all scales have convergent validity.

4.1.4. Measurement Model: Analysis of the Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity occurs when the construct under study is not significantly correlated with constructs that operationalize latent variables different from that operationalized by the construct under study [101]. To analyze the discriminant validity of the scales, the cross-loadings were examined, and we also applied the Fornell–Larcker criterion and analyzed the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio.

The results obtained indicate that the cross-loadings of each item are inferior to the respective loading (Table 3), as recommended by [102]. Following the Fornell–Larcker criterion, Table 6 demonstrates that the square root of the AVE of each construct is greater than the value of the correlations with the other constructs, as proposed by Fornell and Larcker [105] and Hilkenmeier et al. [106].

Table 6. Fornell–Larcker criterion.

	BA	BE	BF	BL	CSR
BA	**0.876**				
BE	0.572	**0.782**			
BF	0.385	0.479	**0.731**		
BL	0.704	0.629	0.625	**0.872**	
CSR	0.511	0.735	0.509	0.595	**0.803**

From the analysis of the HTMT ratio of the data presented in Table 7, we can see that all values obtained were below 0.9, as suggested by Henseler et al. [107] and Hair et al. [102]. Based on the three criteria presented, the discriminant validity of the scales used in this investigation is proven.

Table 7. Heterotrait–monotrait ratio.

	AF_PER	AF_PRI	BA	BE	BF	BL	CI	CSR	DA
AF_PER									
AF_PRI	0.749								
BA	0.421	0.373							
BE	0.488	0.461	0.620						
BF	-	-	0.413	0.514					
BL	0.577	0.546	0.772	0.679	0.663				
CI	0.803	0.705	0.383	0.470	-	0.659			
CSR	0.515	0.479	0.554	0.797	0.538	0.639	0.499		
DA	0.769	0.647	0.339	0.458	-	0.607	0.832	0.472	

Note: correlations between the second-order construct and the respective first-order constructs are not considered [104].

4.2. Structural Model Analysis

4.2.1. Multicollinearity Analysis

The VIF analysis was performed to test the possible multicollinearity. As noted above, if the VIF value is 3.0 or less, multicollinearity is unlikely to be a problem [102]. Thus, from the VIF values that oscillate between 1.526 and 2.451, it is possible to affirm that the structural model does not present multicollinearity problems.

4.2.2. Assessment of Statistical Significance, Sign, and Magnitude of Structural Relationships

In the present investigation, relationships whose structural coefficients presented p-values lower than the 5% significance level were considered statistically significant. In this case, the relationships referring to H1 (CSR $\rightarrow$ BL), H2 (BE $\rightarrow$ BL), H3 (CSR $\rightarrow$ BA), H4 (BE $\rightarrow$ BA), H5 (BA $\rightarrow$ BL) and H6 (BL $\rightarrow$ BF) have statistical significance, with p-values below 5% (<0.05) and structural coefficients (direct effects) with a positive sign (Table 8), as shown in the research model. Thus, based on the results presented, the six hypotheses defined in the research model are corroborated.

Table 8. Direct, indirect, and total effects.

Relations	Direct Effects		Total Indirect Effects		Specific Indirect Effects		Total Effects	
	β	*p*-Value	β	*p*-Value	β	*p*-Value	β	*p*-Value
BA → BL	0.486	<0.001	-	-	-	-	0.486	<0.001
BA → BF			0.304	<0.001	-	-	0.304	<0.001
BA → BL → BF	-	-	-	-	0.304	<0.001	-	-
BE → BA	0.427	<0.001	-	-	-	-	0.427	<0.001
BE → BL	0.209	<0.001	0.208	<0.001	-	-	0.416	<0.001
BE → BA → BL	-	-	-	-	0.208	<0.001	-	-
BE → BF	-	-	0.260	<0.001	-	-	0.260	<0.001
BE → BL → BF	-	-	-	-	0.130	<0.001	-	-
BE → BA → BL → BF	-	-	-	-	0.130	<0.001	-	-
BL → BF	0.625	<0.001	-	-	-	-	0.625	<0.001
CSR → BA	0.197	0.004	-	-	-	-	0.197	0.004
CSR → BL	0.193	<0.001	0.096	0.005	-	-	0.289	<0.001
CSR → BA → BL	-	-	-	-	0.096	0.005	-	-
CSR → BF	-	-	0.181	<0.001	-	-	0.181	<0.001
CSR → BA → BL → BF	-	-	-	-	0.060	0.006	-	-
CSR → BL → BF	-	-	-	-	0.121	<0.001	-	-

As illustrated in Figure 2, the results demonstrate that general perceptions of CSR and general perceptions of business ethics explain 34.5% of the variance of brand attitude. In

turn, general perceptions of CSR, general perceptions of business ethics, and brand attitude explain 58.9% of the variance of brand love. Finally, 39.7% of the variance of brand fidelity is explained by brand love and brand attitude.
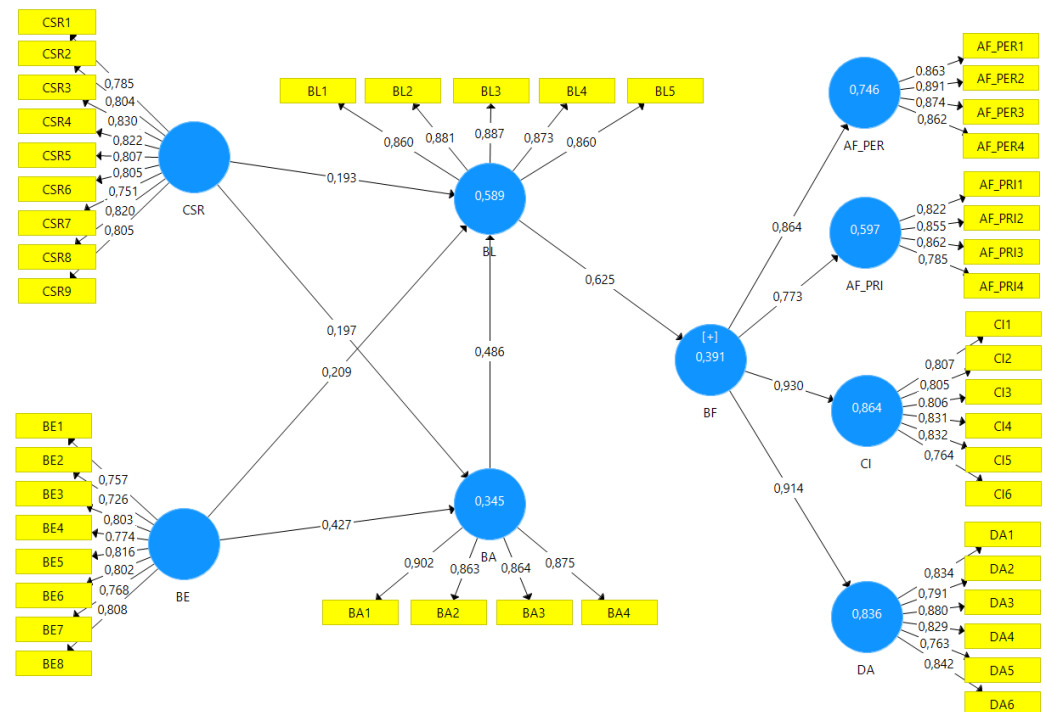

Figure 2. Structural model.

From Table 8, it is possible to see that all indirect, total, and specific effects were statistically significant and had a positive sign. By magnitude, the specific indirect effect BA $\rightarrow$ BL $\rightarrow$ BF stands out (β = 0.342; *p*-value < 0.001). General perceptions of business ethics have a stronger overall indirect effect on brand fidelity (β = 0.260; *p*-value < 0.001) than general perceptions of CSR (β = 0.181; *p*-value < 0.001).

All total effects are statistically significant and have a positive sign. The greatest magnitude of total effect is exerted by brand love on brand fidelity (β = 0.702; *p*-value < 0.001), due exclusively to the respective direct effect (Figure 2).

5. Discussion

This research brings a new understanding of CSR and business ethics, and how they influence brand love, brand attitude, and brand fidelity, reinforcing the need for organizations to undertake social responsibility and business ethics practices. We decided to explore this topic because we realized its urgency and relevance as an important strategy for the business, given that its implementation offers a competitive advantage to companies [13,108,109]. Discovering new relationships of CSR and ethics with constructs from the field of marketing can further enrich this area, bringing about new academic and managerial perspectives [110].

Corroborating Ferrel's [9] findings that business ethics and CSR should be used as distinct constructs, we suggest that companies should implement values that govern their business activities, demonstrate principles and follow a code of conduct, and that its responsible activities should reach society, the environment, and other groups [18,92]. By empirically validating the relationships of business ethics and CSR with brand fidelity, we see the importance of companies developing strategies based on ethical values and CSR [109,111], in order to drive their results and improve their reputation, once we understand that it is easier to work with current customers to make them more loyal, rather than looking for new customers.

We suggest that the organization assess how its brand is being perceived by stakeholders and rethink what actions and changes are needed to improve its corporate image [9]. A good corporate image can favor the strengthening of the profitable relationship between the organization and its stakeholders [47].

Hypothesis 1 predicted that general perceptions of CSR positively influence brand love. The results confirmed the studies by Baena [69] and Gilal et al. [20], demonstrating that consumers tend to have greater feelings of love for a brand when they perceive a greater social commitment in it, as indicated through CSR practices.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that general perceptions of business ethics positively influence brand love. The results confirm the studies by Kim et al. [75] and Singh et al. [72], demonstrating that consumers tend to love a brand more when they perceive ethical behavior in business undertaken by the organization.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that general perceptions of CSR positively influence brand attitude. The results confirm those of Ramesh et al. [24] and Rivera et al. [80], demonstrating that consumers tend to have more favorable attitudes towards a brand when they perceive that the organization has CSR actions.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that general perceptions of business ethics positively influence brand attitude. The results confirm those of Ferrell et al. [9] and Shea [86], demonstrating that brands with ethical behaviors contribute to the formation of more favorable consumer attitudes towards them.

It is important to highlight that the option of addressing general perceptions of CSR and general perceptions of business ethics as different constructs proved to be the best, as suggested by Ferrell et al. [9], as both constructs showed adequate reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity, and the four hypotheses that involved them were validated.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that brand attitude positively influences brand love. The results confirm those of Grace et al. [90]. It makes sense to imagine that consumers with favorable attitudes towards a brand love that brand more, and the results corroborate this hypothesis.

Finally, hypothesis 6 predicted that brand love positively influences brand fidelity. The results confirm the studies by Grace et al. [90] and Joshi and Garg [91], demonstrating that consumers who love a brand will tend to have greater loyalty to that brand. It is to be expected that a person is more faithful to something they love.

We conclude that although CSR remains important, customers value business ethics as a critical factor in their perceptions of the brand, contributing more strongly to brand fidelity. Thus, the development of corporate ethics and compliance programs must be a priority, and the benefits of ethical behavior must be linked to the organizations' marketing actions. Therefore, being perceived as an ethical brand is a "moral" obligation, but it can also bring very positive results for the company's marketing indicators [12,36]. In other words, being perceived as an ethical organization, in addition to being correct, strengthens consumers' positive perceptions about the brand, impacting the organization's profitability.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Contributions

This research showed that CSR and business ethics can strongly contribute to brand love, brand attitude and brand fidelity, reinforcing that consumers not only want to buy good products or services, but also want to perceive higher values as associated with the brand, and tend to commit more when they form more positive associations with it [112,113]. This study also extends the findings of Bezençon and Blili [71], who demonstrated that ethical products influence the involvement of consumers with a brand. It has been shown that when consumers perceive ethical behavior enacted by the brand, they immediately link it to their own values, creating a strong connection and identification with the brand, as well as greater involvement and commitment [73,74].

Based on the results, this study presents several contributions: (1) it contributes to the approach of CSR and business ethics as different and independent constructs, as proposed by Ferrell et al. [9], strengthening the need to study them in a separate and well-defined way; (2) in addition, this study shows that business ethics has a greater impact on brand fidelity than CSR, showing its influence when studied in isolation; (3) it contributes to the progressive consolidation of "brand fidelity", a construct with a recently developed conceptualization and scale, bringing a greater understanding of the relationships that influence this multidimensional variable; (4) this investigation also provides further evidence of the impact of business ethics and CSR on brand love and brand attitude, strengthening the study of these relationships; (5) finally, for management, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the importance of organizations being perceived as socially responsible and ethical, treating these constructs as distinct, and thus requiring specific actions for each of them.

From a managerial perspective, companies must recognize the need to demonstrate behaviors that consumers consider positive from the point of view of ethics and social responsibility. In a practical way, managers and employees are the front line of the organization's operations. Therefore, the behavior of these managers and employees is an important part of an organization's being perceived as ethical and socially responsible. Based on this understanding, organizations need to think about specific and intentional ethics and CSR programs that guide the conduct of managers and employees in their activities.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research Avenues

The present study has limitations that need to be mentioned. First, the MTurk platform can present inattentive respondents, who respond to numerous surveys on the platform. One way to overcome this limitation is to use an attention check question [96]. The question that asks respondents to indicate in writing a brand they "bought and use" serves to help reduce the risk of inattentive respondents. A second limitation is the fact that the present investigation had a sample composed only of US residents. As MTurk is composed largely of North Americans, there could be problems in collecting data from other nationalities. Therefore, from the beginning, it was decided to limit the sample to the USA.

For future investigations, we suggest using different scales of CSR and business ethics to analyze the effects on consumer behavior, and to understand whether the perception and importance given to CSR and business ethics actions vary according to the demographic profile (gender, age, education, social class). Regarding the brand fidelity construct, as it is a new multidimensional character construct, future studies can test the relationships of this variable with other constructs.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Sociodemographic characterization of the sample.

	Category	N	%
	Feminine	326	58.3
Gender	Masculine	229	41.0
	Other	4	0.7
	18–24	65	11.6
	25–29	104	18.6
Age group	30–39	185	33.1
	40–49	104	18.6
	50–59	60	10.7
	More than 60	41	7.3
	Single, never married	169	30.2
	Married or domestic partnership	335	59.9
Marital status	Divorced	36	6.4
	Separeted	9	1.6
	Widowed	10	1.8
	Employed full-time	357	63.9
	Employed part-time	68	12.2
	Studant	33	5.9
	Unemployed	26	4.7
Occupation Current employment status	Self-employed	24	4.3
	Homemaker	24	4.3
	Retired	21	3.8
	Unable to work	5	0.9
	Other	1	0.2
	Less than high school graduation	6	1.1
	High school diploma or equivalent	135	24.2
Highest completed education level	Bachelor's degree	276	49.4
	Master's degree	110	19.7
	Doctorate degree	12	2.1
	Other	20	3.6
	No income	23	4.1
	Under USD 25,000	105	18.8
	USD 25,000–USD 49,999 (work class)	168	30.1
Personal annual net income (USD)	USD 50,000–USD 74,999 (lower middle class)	133	23.8
	USD 75,000–USD 149,999 (middle class)	106	19.0
	USD 150,000–USD 199,999 (upper middle class)	17	3.0
	Mais de USD 200,000 (upper class)	7	1.3

Appendix B

Table A2. Scales.

Constructs	Items		References
General perception of CSR (CSR)	CSR1	This brand supports their communities	Ferrell et al. [9]
	CSR2	This brand supports employee diversity	
	CSR3	This brand contributes to solving social issues	
	CSR4	This brand supports employee inclusion	
	CSR5	This brand provides adequate benefits to employees	
	CSR6	This brand makes charitable contributions	
	CSR7	This brand provides fair return to investors	
	CSR8	This brand addresses social issues	
	CSR9	This brand incorporates sustainability information for all stakeholders	
General perception of business ethics (BE)	BE1	This brand has a code of ethics	Ferrell et al. [9]
	BE2	This brand do not engage in bribery	
	BE3	This brand is not involved in communication that deceives facts	
	BE4	This brand do not damage customers	
	BE5	This brand is transparent in engaging stakeholders	
	BE6	This brand do not deceive customers	
	BE7	This brand has managers that avoid conflicts of interest by not advancing their own interests over those of the firm	
	BE8	This brand is honest in engaging stakeholders	
Brand love (BL)	BL1	This brand makes me very happy	Huang [99]
	BL2	I love this brand	
	BL3	This brand is pure delight	
	BL4	I am passionate about this brand	
	BL5	I'm very attached to this brand	
Brand attitude (BA)		In general, my feelings toward the brand are . . .	Wagner et al. [100]
	BA1	unfavorable/favorable	
	BA2	bad/good	
	BA3	unpleasant/pleasant	
	BA4	negative/positive	

Table A2. *Cont.*

		Dimension 1: Accommodation / Forgiveness (performance) (AF_PER)	
	AF_PER1	If this brand experienced some problems and the was temporarily not up to scratch, I you would continue to use it	
	AF_PER2	If this brand experienced some problems and was temporarily not up to scratch, I would recommend it to others	
	AF_PER3	If this brand experienced some problems and was temporarily not up to scratch, I would support it when others were complaining about it	
	AF_PER4	If this brand experienced some problems and was temporarily not up to scratch, I would make excuses for it	
		Dimension 2: Accommodation/Forgiveness (price) (AF_PRI)	
	AF_PRI1	It doesn't bother me when this brand increases its prices, as I will always use it anyway	
	AF_PRI2	Regardless of what price this brand is, I will always strongly recommend it to others	
	AF_PRI3	When this brand has had a price increase, it has been well justified	
Brand fidelity (BF)	AF_PRI4	This brand is still well worth the money even when its prices goes up	Grace et al. [32]
		Dimension 3: Cognitive Interdependence (CI)	
	CI1	I refer to this brand as "my" brand	
	CI2	I feel I have a strong bond with this brand	
	CI3	I would be lost without this brand	
	CI4	This brand says something about me	
	CI5	This brand is an important part of my life.	
	CI6	I would be offended if someone said something bad about this brand.	
		Dimension 4: Derogation from alternatives (DA)	
	DA1	There is really no other brand like this brand	
	DA2	If asked, I would be quick to point out how superior this brand is to its competitors.	
	DA3	This brand is one of a kind and, in my opinion, there is no competition	
	DA4	It is impossible for another brand to compete with this brand.	
	DA5	This brand is faultless	
	DA6	I would be devastated if I could not buy this brand anymore as nothing else will ever come near it	

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