

Purpose is the new branding: understanding conscientious purpose-driven marketing and its impact on brand outcomes

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Abstract

Purpose – Consumers increasingly expect brands to have a social purpose. Yet, guidelines on how to effectively engage in conscientious purpose-driven branding are lacking. This study aims to better understand what the key drivers of a successful conscientious purpose-driven branding strategy are and what is its impact on key brand outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – Data was gathered using a self-administered survey, answered by 670 young adults belonging to generations Y and Z. The study integrates in a single moderated-mediation model, tested using partial least squares structural equation modelling, the joint effects of cause–brand–consumer congruences, cause-brand authenticity and brand image, on consumers' intention to purchase and recommend the brand.

Findings – Consumer-brand congruence mediates the path from cause-brand congruence and authenticity to brand image, which in turn impacts purchase and recommendation intentions, with authenticity playing a dominant role. Moreover, for consumers highly congruent with the cause/purpose, the direct effect of cause-brand congruence on brand image becomes non-significant and only works through consumer-brand congruence.

Originality/value – Theoretically, this study contributes to a better understanding of how and when conscientious purpose-driven branding can be effective. Its findings further advance prior research, by providing an alternative path anchored on cause-brand authenticity to explain positive effects of conscientious purpose-driven marketing on brand outcomes. Moreover, it challenges prior assumptions regarding the impact of consumer-cause congruence on the effectiveness of these strategies. Finally, it highlights that cause-consumer and brand-consumer congruencies also play a role, offering an integrated, triadic view of conscientious purpose-driven branding strategies. Managerially, it provides insights to brand managers wishing to successfully implement these strategies and better understand the role of brands as “purpose-driven entities”.

Keywords Conscientious purpose-driven branding, Cause-brand congruence, Cause-brand authenticity, Brand image, Self-brand congruity, Consumer-cause congruence, Brand loyalty

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As consumers across the world are becoming more socially conscious, brands are increasingly expected to have a “purpose” beyond profit maximization and face increased pressure to take social and environmental stands (Aaker, 2023; Parris and Guzmán, 2023). For example, Dove, as part of Unilever's Sustainable Living Brands, has been promoting real beauty through the self-esteem project and Patagonia has been an active supporter of environmental causes (Ind and Iglesias, 2022; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022). These stands not only represent their corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability or sociopolitical activism, but also help define their brand purpose, the focus of internal and external communications and guide

their brand strategies. Albeit organizations can have a purpose that goes beyond financials that does not involve addressing societal changes, truly purpose-driven brands do (Aaker, 2023; Ind and Iglesias, 2022). In fact, “purpose” was elected a key

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The authors would like to thank all three anonymous reviewers for their (in)valuable feedback and insightful comments throughout the review process.

Funding: During this research, CEF.UP has been financed by Portuguese public funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., in the framework of the project with reference UIDB/04105/2020.

Received 23 August 2023

Revised 15 March 2024

12 May 2024

Accepted 12 May 2024

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/1061-0421.htm>



Journal of Product & Brand Management
33/6 (2024) 761–782
Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 1061-0421]
[DOI 10.1108/JPBM-08-2023-4667]

concept to consider if aiming for success in the 21st century (Hajdas and Kłeczek, 2021) and brands' social relevance and impact have been coined as a trending topic in branding research (Golob *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, the Marketing Science Institute elected the impact of brand purpose on consumption behaviour as a 2022–2024 research priority (MSI, 2022).

Purpose-led branding (Prasad, 2011) aims to unite a brand's core values with the right cause making it a part of its brand identity, raise awareness, build emotional bonds with its customers and positively impact a societal need. Brand purpose is not only about the cause that the business supports and seeks to improve, but also about the difference the brand aims to make in the world and how it is communicated (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2021; Thaichon *et al.*, 2022). For example, brands like Patagonia or Lush not only market a cause but carry it through everything they do and say over time (Golob and Podnar, 2019; Schmidt *et al.*, 2022). Ultimately, being good pays off. Brands with a purpose grow at twice the rate of those without any higher-order societal aim and are more successful in building goodwill among customers (Kantar, 2020).

In recent years, consumers have expressed a preference for brands that reflect their social and personal values (Podnar and Golob, 2024). Seventy-five percent of US consumers want companies to positively impact societies by addressing societal issues and 69% are less likely to support those that are only in business to make money. American consumers are also more likely to think positively of (89%), trust (86%) and be loyal to (83%) brands that lead with purpose (CONE/Porter Novelli, 2019, 2021). Sixty-six percent would switch to a product offered by a purpose-driven company, a figure that goes up to 91% when Millennials are polled (CONE/Porter Novelli, 2018). Recent data, however, shows a slight decline on the percentage of American consumers that believe brands should articulate and be vocal about their sociopolitical stands (Gallup, 2023). Research also shows that their beliefs are not always a guide to their purchase behaviour, as consumers question brands' authenticity, particularly if a brand is perceived to be “woke-washing” (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024; Rohmanue and Jacobi, 2024).

Taking a stand on social or environmental issues is tempting for brands that want to remain relevant, particularly when it comes to appealing to a new generation of consumers, highly aware of these issues. Companies thus need to decide when and how to engage in purpose-led branding. Yet, what drives the perceived success of such type of brand strategy remains a puzzle to be solved. Scholarly insights are thus needed to understand the role of brands as “purpose-driven entities” (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020), given the fact that some well-intentioned purpose-led branding strategies simply go unnoticed or even backfire, without creating business value for the firm (Rodríguez-Vilá and Bharadwaj, 2017). For example, the consequences of an unfulfilled “purpose” promise can have more negative consequences than simple woke-washing (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, although brands that consumers see as having a positive impact are reported to outperform other brands, growing up to three times faster than their competitors (Deloitte, 2019), it remains unclear how purpose-driven branding may drive sales and purchase intention (McCull and Ritch, 2020). This study thus addresses two research questions: what are the key drivers of a successful purpose-driven branding strategy, and what is its

impact on three key brand outcomes – brand image, purchase and recommendation intentions?

This research posits that to explain the positive effects of purpose-driven branding on brand outcomes, it is necessary to focus beyond cause-brand fit and authenticity and understand the role that cause-consumer and brand-consumer congruencies also play. To analyse this integrated, triadic view of purpose-driven branding strategies, a comprehensive moderated-mediation model is developed to examine the role that cause-brand congruence and authenticity play on improving consumer-brand congruence and brand image, and its impact on consumers' intention to purchase and recommend a brand. This research further shows how the process unfolds and is contingent to different levels of consumer-cause congruence. The study focuses on Gen Y and Z consumers, cohorts who are more socially aware than previous generations (Kadic-Magljajlic *et al.*, 2019) and thus deemed relevant for this study.

Contributions are manifold. Firstly, the research contributes to a better understanding of how and when can brand purpose be effective, as well as of its impact on consumer decision-making (MSI, 2022). Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of authentic purpose-driven branding for brand behavioural outcomes. While previous research on cause-related marketing (CrM) and CSR has considered cause-brand fit as critical to yield positive consumer responses (Guzmán and Davis, 2017; Sung *et al.*, 2021), the findings provide an alternative path based on cause-brand authenticity to explain the effect of cause-related strategies on brand outcomes. Thirdly, it adds to existing research by examining the joint effects of cause-brand-consumer congruence in purpose-driven branding, as most research on CrM has not studied consumers' role as active contributors to its effectiveness. However, in a purpose-driven context, it is reasonable to expect that consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards the brand depend not only on the cause-brand association but also on consumers' own connections with these two agents. Because no known study has yet examined these three types of congruencies simultaneously in a single framework, this research ultimately contributes to the existing literature by offering an integrated, triadic view of purpose-driven branding.

Conscientious purpose-driven branding

As consumers are becoming more socially conscious (Parris and Guzmán, 2023), brands are increasingly expected to have a “purpose” beyond wealth creation and are thus becoming “purpose-driven entities” (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). A young generation of prosocial consumers, regarded as the “purpose-driven” generation, is especially drawn to purposeful brands (Hsu, 2017). Therefore, purpose is increasingly seen as a key driver of brands' competitive edge through its impact on societal needs and people's lives (Hajdas and Kłeczek, 2021). It is also a way for brands to broaden their role and remain relevant, to create meaningful emotional connections and to engage its stakeholders, motivating them to spread the brand's message and influencing their buying decisions (Iglesias and Ind, 2020). This “purpose-driven” generation is even influencing B2B brands to adopt a conscientious purpose-driven branding approach as they expect to work for companies that make a difference (Guzmán *et al.*, 2024).

Brand purpose, in essence, is the reason for the brand to exist, what it stands for and the difference it aims to make in the world (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2021). The term was first popularized by Stengel (2011), and later reinforced by Prasad (2011), who defined purpose-led branding as a strategy aiming to unite a brand's core values with the right cause/purpose, making it a part of brand identity, to raise awareness, build emotional bonds with its customers and positively impact a societal need. Nevertheless, although interest in brand purpose has increased sharply in the last decade, it remains an under-researched topic (Thaichon *et al.*, 2022). Although studies examining purpose-driven branding are increasing, scholarly insights are still needed to better understand purpose-driven branding from both an academic and a practitioner perspective (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022). Its precise conceptualization remains unclear (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020), with only a handful of studies differentiating it from other related concepts, such as CrM, CSR and brand activism (Table 1).

Firstly, purpose differs from CrM and CSR, as it goes further and portrays an essential principle rooted in a brand (Hsu, 2017). CrM is “the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges” (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988, p. 60). Simply put, CrM involves brands donating to non-profit organizations (NPO) or causes whenever a purchase is made (Ilicic *et al.*, 2019). Unlike what happens with brand purpose, which is a long-lasting commitment that drives everything a brand does and is more relational than transactional (Hsu, 2017), CrM programs characterized by a short-term focus are pervasive and their main objective is to generate funds for the NPO/cause, as well as to increase sales (Pereira *et al.*, 2024; Varadarajan and Menon, 1988).

CrM can be situated in the context of CSR (van den Brink *et al.*, 2006), which in turn can be broadly defined as the responsible role of businesses in society (Golob and Podnar, 2019). CSR refers to the “social, environmental, ethical, and philanthropic obligations of firms towards their stakeholders” (Muniz *et al.*, 2019, p. 865). Although the line between CSR and purpose-led branding may blur, these are two distinct concepts. While a strategic approach to CSR involves integrating socially responsible activities into the brand's value proposition (Muniz *et al.*, 2019), CSR may not be at the core of brand positioning and the company may not directly communicate it as a part of the brand's identity. Examples include some well-known global brands such as Unilever and Ikea. Conversely, brands following a purpose-led strategy, such as Patagonia and Ben and Jerry's, go beyond that by aligning their whole business and brand strategy with CSR, which should be at the core of brand positioning (Golob and Podnar, 2019).

Although sharing some similarities, brand activism differs from brand purpose, CSR and CrM. While these latter strategies typically address generally accepted, non-divisive concerns, brand activism lacks this type of consensus, as it implies an organization's engagement in a controversial or polarizing sociopolitical issue not necessarily related to their core business (Fletcher-Brown *et al.*, 2024), thus involving greater uncertainty and risk (Wannow *et al.*, 2024). Brand activism can be considered an evolution of CSR (Parris and Guzmán, 2023) and is defined as an emerging marketing tactic for brands seeking to stand out in a fragmented marketplace by taking public stances on institutionally contested issues – i.e. for

which the society has yet to reach consensus (Haupt *et al.*, 2023; Pimentel *et al.*, 2024). As such, through activism, the brand becomes a leading change agent through the support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue, using a “built-in divide” in stakeholders' sentiment (Key *et al.*, 2023). Another difference is that CSR, CrM and purpose-led branding are usually part of a company's strategy, whereas brand activism can sometimes be tactical, *ad hoc* or accidental (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Moreover, from a strategic approach, the stance on sociopolitical issues may not be implemented as an integral part of the brand's core positioning, unlike what happens in purpose-driven strategies. In other words, many brands can be described as having activist elements or as taking activist stands, but few reach the point of using it at a core brand level in a consistent way (Koch, 2020).

Following the above discussion, and given that brands can have a purpose without having a societal impact, this research uses and defines the term conscientious purpose-driven branding (hereafter CPB) as “a branding strategy that unites a brand's core values with a higher cause/purpose, making it a part of a brand's identity and positioning in the long-term, to raise awareness, build emotional bonds with consumers and positively impact a societal need” to highlight the societal aspect that these strategies must address (Aaker, 2023). In line with Ind and Iglesias (2022), this research posits that societally-focused purpose-driven branding must be preceded by the term conscientious because both an individual conscience – which trickles down to a firm-level – and a brand-level conscience have to exist for a firm to make the decision to develop a societally-focused purpose-driven brand. It is this conscientiousness that leads to the needed awareness and critical thinking that consequently lead to action (Ind and Iglesias, 2022). Conscientiousness is also what allows brands to make societally-focused decisions when the inevitable tensions between stakeholders and shareholders emerge (Iglesias and Ind, 2020).

This research focuses on the positive side of CPB – i.e. it assumes a minimal level of positive consumer involvement with the purpose chosen by the brand. While aiming to better understand the key drivers of successful CPB and its impact on key brand outcomes, it examines the joint effects of cause-brand-consumer congruences and cause-brand authenticity, on brand image and consumers' intention to purchase and recommend the brand.

Theoretical background and research hypotheses

Cause-brand congruence, cause-brand authenticity and brand image

Supporting a purpose may not only help to foster social change but can also have an impact on brand performance outcomes, such as revenues, brand equity (Cowan and Guzmán, 2020) and brand awareness and image (Duarte and Silva, 2018). Brand image has been recently defined as “the network of mental positive and negative associations stakeholder(s) form of a brand” (Parris and Guzmán, 2023). Brand image has been described as crucial for identifying how consumers feel about brands and if a positive relationship exists (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022). Sources of favourable, unique and strong brand associations are numerous and may include sponsorships (Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012), CSR initiatives (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020) or social alliances (Roosens and Dens, 2019). A

Table 1 Conscientious purpose-driven branding and related concepts

	Corporate social responsibility	Cause-related marketing	Cause or purpose-led branding	Brand activism
Definition	Social, environmental, ethical and philanthropic obligations of firms towards their stakeholders (Muniz et al., 2019) reflecting the responsible role of businesses in society (Golob and Podnar, 2019)	Marketing activities characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988)	Branding strategy aiming to unite a brand's core values with the right cause/purpose, making it a part of brand identity (Prasad, 2011) and positioning in the long-term	An emerging marketing tactic for brands seeking to stand out in a fragmented marketplace (Vredenburg et al., 2020) by publicly taking stands on institutionally divisive social and political issues (Pimentel et al., 2024)
Aim	Seek reputational and economic benefit via consumer appreciation of association with an issue (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and to attain organizational and social long-term benefits (Ilicic et al., 2019)	Seek to influence consumer perception through company-cause association (Vredenburg et al., 2020), to generate funds for the cause, and to increase sales (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988)	Support a cause, raise awareness, promote social change and bond with consumers (Golob, 2024); seeks also reputational and economic benefit via consumer appreciation of association with a cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020)	Take a stance, raise awareness, promote social change and bond with consumers (Podnar and Golob, 2024); seeks also reputational and economic benefit via consumer appreciation of association with a cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020)
Nature	Strategic (van den Brink et al., 2006), but not implemented as an integral part of the brand's core positioning (Golob and Podnar, 2019)	Tactic (van den Brink et al., 2006), pervasively short-term and transactionally oriented (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988)	Strategic, implemented as an integral part of the brand's core positioning (Golob and Podnar, 2019)	Can be tactic or strategic (Vredenburg et al., 2020); but may not be implemented as an integral part of the brand's core positioning
Degree of controversy	Non-controversial issues (Wannow et al., 2024)	Non-controversial issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020)	No or minimal controversial issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020)	Deliberate controversial, polarizing issues (Osuna Ramirez et al., 2024), yet to reach consensus (Vahdati and Voss, 2019)
Illustrative examples	Danone's "One Planet, One Health" initiative aims to bring health through food to as many people as possible (Golob and Podnar, 2019)	Pampers donation of a proportion of sales profit to UNICEF for vaccine against neonatal tetanus (Vredenburg et al., 2020)	Patagonia's active support for environmental causes for decades (Schmidt et al., 2022)	Pepsi's campaign, featuring Kendall Jenner, in the midst of the "Black Lives Matter" movement (Mirzaei et al., 2022)

Source: Authors' own work

congruent and authentic cause-brand alliance with which the customer is positively involved may be key to elicit a positive effect on the overall image of a brand.

The impact of cause-brand congruence on brand image

The literature on CrM and CSR has consistently considered the perceived level of cause-brand congruence or fit as critical to yield positive consumer responses (Pereira *et al.*, 2024; Silva *et al.*, 2021). As such, cause and brand pairings that are formed more easily are those in which there is a perceived natural or plausible fit between the brand and cause” (Till and Nowak, 2000). Several terms – fit, similarity, relevance, match and congruence – have been used throughout the literature; yet the terms reflect the same broad construct, that of consumers accepting and recognizing the connection between the parties as compatible (Nan and Heo, 2007). Accordingly, perceived fit is a cognitive and analytical measure of congruence between two entities (Osorio *et al.*, 2021). Cause-brand congruence thus reflects the degree to which the product/service that a brand represents relates to the cause, and the extent in which the values of the cause and the brand are aligned (Guzmán and Davis, 2017). But whether based on functional or image similarity (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999), the literature agrees that cause-brand congruence implies the belongingness of the attributes of both parties so that the two make sense and match-up in consumers’ minds (Ilicic *et al.*, 2019).

Conceptually, the idea of fit is grounded in the literature on sponsorship, brand endorsement, brand extension and co-branding. Within sponsorship and endorsement literature, the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) emphasizes the importance of “fit” between endorsers’ (or sponsors’) attributes and the endorsed product (or the sponsee) in determining endorsement (or sponsorship) effectiveness. An endorser that “fits” the associated product category (e.g. an athlete endorsing sports brands) will likely be more effective (Ilicic *et al.*, 2019). Research on co-branding finds that a high degree of fit between partners results in consumer beliefs that the alliance brings together brands that are meaningful, logical, complementary, compatible and congruent (Bigné-Alcañiz *et al.*, 2010). Research further considers the fit between a parent brand and the extension category as a determinant of brand extension success (Spiggle *et al.*, 2012).

Cause-brand congruence allows for activating associations in consumers’ memory, facilitating meaning transfer (Ilicic *et al.*, 2019). Meaning transfer theory suggests that those who receive a brand message assign meanings to that message based on their personal experiences and values (McCracken, 1989). For instance, when the message links a brand with a celebrity (endorsement) or a sporting event (sponsorship), the pre-existing associations and meanings held in consumers’ memories regarding that same celebrity or sporting event will likely be transferred to the brand (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999), impacting the set of brand associations held in consumers’ memory (Keller, 1993) which make up brand image (Parris and Guzmán, 2023). Sources of favourable, and strong brand associations may also include CSR initiatives (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020) or social alliances (Roosens and Dens, 2019). The image transfer process is facilitated when a match exists between the brand and the celebrity or the sponsored event (Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012), or between a brand

and a higher-order societal aim (Joo *et al.*, 2019). In fact, a brand that is perceived to care about a cause can transfer meaning and increase the perception of fit between a brand and the cause (Muniz and Guzmán, 2021). Thus, given the prominence of CPB in modern marketing it is expected that:

H1a. Cause-brand congruence positively influences brand image.

The impact of cause-brand authenticity on brand image

CPB is not without criticism, and is often questioned by stakeholders, who are suspicious about brands’ genuine motives (Joo *et al.*, 2019) and may accuse them of “woke-washing” – i.e. attempting to market themselves as being concerned with societal issues whilst displaying inconsistencies between messaging and practice (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). More than half of consumers believe brands’ involvement in social issues is mainly a marketing ploy to sell more products (Edelman, 2019). Insincere initiatives that lack authenticity may leave a negative impression on stakeholders if they feel that the organization is not really committed to the cause (Alhouti *et al.*, 2016). Authenticity is thus critical to the success of brand activism (Rohmanue and Jacobi, 2024; Chu *et al.*, 2023). While emerging as a key determinant in consumer-brand relationships, brand authenticity, “the cornerstone of contemporary marketing” (Ilicic and Webster, 2014, p. 344), has been broadly defined as “a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers” (Napoli *et al.*, 2014, p. 1091). Simply put, a brand is perceived as authentic when consumers see it as genuine, real and true to oneself and to what it stands for (Ilicic *et al.*, 2019).

Research on brand extension associates authenticity with a “legitimate, culturally consistent extension of the parent brand” (Spiggle *et al.*, 2012, p. 969). In a CSR context, authenticity has been defined as “the perception of a company’s CSR actions as a genuine and true expression of the company’s beliefs and behaviour towards society that extend beyond legal requirements” (Alhouti *et al.*, 2016, p. 1243). Ilicic *et al.* (2019, p. 51) define co-branding authenticity as “consumer perceptions of the co-branding partnership as genuine and real” beyond mere profit-related intentions. Finally, Vredenburg *et al.*’s (2020), authentic brand activism matches a brand’s purpose and values with marketing messaging and corporate practice. Against this backdrop, in this study cause-brand authenticity is defined as consumer perceptions of CPB being genuine and truthful – i.e. the perception that a brand’s purpose matches its claims and actions and that brands sincerely care about the societal issues they support.

Unlike prior studies, which have seldom examined fit and authenticity jointly (Osorio *et al.*, 2021), this research aims to assess their concurrent effect on consumer responses following CPB efforts. Authenticity, a richer and broader construct than fit, captures a more emotional perspective that allows consumers to identify more cues to evaluate the deeper meanings underlying the alliance between the parties (Osorio *et al.*, 2021). Brands may thus be able to successfully stretch into spaces where they do not “fit” according to traditional conceptions (Spiggle *et al.*, 2012) as long as they are perceived as being true to themselves (Prados-Peña and del-Barrio-

García, 2018). As such, fit judgements may fall short, because not only perceived similarity and relevance matter to consumers, but also the perceived legitimacy of the extension. Therefore, authenticity should complement fit as a predictor of brand extension success (Osorio *et al.*, 2022).

Similarly, not only perceived match between partners, but also the perceived genuineness of brands' motives may contribute to brand image within social alliances (Roosens and Dens, 2019), as consumers form beliefs concerning a brand's causal attributions for engaging in purpose-branding (Ilicic *et al.*, 2019). This may be particularly true when it comes to a cause or purpose given the compelling cultural meanings both carry (Ilicic and Webster, 2014). In fact, consumers are likely to value brands that appear original and "real" in an increasingly commercialized and manipulative world (Silvonen, 2019). But despite the undeniable influence of authenticity on consumers' perceptions, the literature on CSR and CrM has paid little attention to authenticity and its impact on the success of cause-related investments (Joo *et al.*, 2019). Yet, consumers' perception of authenticity can in fact be a significant factor in building brand associations in consumers' minds and one of the key values of brand image (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Markovic *et al.*, 2022). As such, in a CPB context it is expected that:

H1b. Cause-brand authenticity positively influences brand image.

Effects of brand image on purchase and recommendation intentions

Building and sustaining a positive brand image is critical for developing and maintaining brand loyalty (Jung *et al.*, 2020). This study focuses on two widely used loyalty-related outcomes: purchase and recommendation intentions. Purchase intention reflects customers' conscious plans to acquire a brand, product or service (Belanche *et al.*, 2021) whereas intentions to recommend a brand predict whether the consumer offers positive assessments (Casaló *et al.*, 2017). Prior research acknowledges that customers with a favourable image of a brand tend to hold a favourable attitude towards the brand's products, which in turn positively influences customers' loyalty, purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020) and decrease vulnerability to competitive marketing actions (Keller, 1993). Recent research also identifies brand activism as a driver of brand loyalty (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023). Hence, this research posits that in a CPB context:

H2. Brand image positively influences (a) purchase and (b) recommendation intentions.

Cause-brand congruence, cause-brand authenticity and self-brand congruity

Consumers often use brands to communicate how they define themselves to others or to form and alter their identities to fit their perceptions of who they are or wish to be (Silvonen, 2019). Consumers identify with brands to the "degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of the self" (Fournier, 1998, p. 364). Self-congruity theory (SGT) explains

consumers' tendency to prefer brands congruent with their own self-image (Sirgy *et al.*, 2016). According to SGT, consumers make a mental comparison in respect to the similarity or dissimilarity of entities' values (e.g. a brand) and their own set of values, which can lead to high self-congruity (Schivinski *et al.*, 2022). Self-brand congruity thus reflects "the perception of sameness between the brand (signifying an object with symbolic meanings) and the consumer" (Tuškej *et al.*, 2013, p. 54).

In CPB, the similarity between the consumer and the brand is sought at the level of common values related to the cause. Consumers who perceive their own values as similar will be attracted to the brand as a source of self-definition (Golob and Podnar, 2019). These shared values may thus elicit a high sense of self-brand congruity, helping to explain positive attitudes and behaviours towards the brand. For instance, prior studies state that brand's social responsibility messages help promote self-brand congruity (Bigné-Alcañiz *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, according to the meaning transfer theory (McCracken, 1989), when a brand associates with a cause, it becomes an entity full of meaning, transferred from the cause to the brand, which consumers positively involved can use to create, enhance or convey their identity to others (Albert *et al.*, 2017).

The impact of cause-brand congruence on self-brand congruity

Although cause-brand congruency is often presented as a primary condition for the success of cause-related branding strategies, their effectiveness may also depend on congruencies involving consumers and their psychological processes. For instance, when a brand aligns with a cause, consumers may infer that the brand has certain desirable traits that not only resonate with their sense of self, but also provide the opportunity for self-enhancement (Vahdati and Voss, 2019) by promoting an identity associated with responsiveness to society (Badenes-Rocha *et al.*, 2019). As cause-brand fit reflects the extent to which the values of the cause and the brand are aligned (Muniz *et al.*, 2019), a noticeable congruence is likely to reinforce consumers' sense of connection with the focal brand through their shared values (Albert *et al.*, 2017). Hence:

H3a. Cause-brand congruence positively influences self-brand congruity.

The impact of cause-brand authenticity on self-brand congruity

Authenticity is usually associated to brands perceived as virtuous or as having "purity of motive" (Napoli *et al.*, 2016). Consumers may seek authenticity in brands for different reasons: to publicly display their membership of a culture or subculture, to express their own moral convictions or to satisfy their need for self-authentication (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). As such, authentic brands can help consumers "to convey their authentic self, thus appropriating authenticity to construct true self-identity" (Oh *et al.*, 2019, p. 234). Brands that are perceived as authentic by clearly showing who they are and what they stand for may be thus important for consumers' identity (Tuškej *et al.*, 2013). A highly authentic brand may remind consumers of a positive characteristic in themselves and allow them to express their core

values, which may in turn lead to a high sense of self-congruity (Akbar and Wymer, 2017). Prior research has suggested a positive influence of brand authenticity on brand congruity in the context of charity support (Wymer and Akbar, 2019) and storytelling (Delgado-Ballester, 2021). Yet, there is dearth of empirical studies exploring the role of authenticity in a CrM domain. Therefore, extending prior findings to the context of this research:

H3b. Cause-brand authenticity positively influences self-brand congruity.

Effects of self-brand congruity on brand outcomes

Past literature posits that consumers evaluate brand image according to the perceived level of self-congruity (Elbedweihy *et al.*, 2016). The stronger the similitude between an entity's values and consumers' own set of values, the more favourably the image of that brand will be perceived – e.g. the more consumers care about animal rights, the more they will prefer a brand such as The Body Shop (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Given consumers' need for self-consistency and reluctance to experience cognitive dissonance (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955), high self-congruity is likely to enhance positive attitudes towards the brand and its overall image. Hence:

H4. Self-brand congruity positively influences brand image.

Moreover, and as previously discussed, brand image may also be influenced by cause-brand congruence and authenticity (*H1*, *H2*). However, it is reasonable to expect that this may occur not only directly, but also through a more complex, indirect process. This paper thus contends that not only cause-brand associations but also consumers themselves may actively contribute to this relationship. More specifically, it suggests that self-brand congruity plays a mediating role. Cause-brand congruence and authenticity may elicit a stronger connection of consumers with brands through shared values (Albert *et al.*, 2017) and by becoming “symbolic resources for self-expression” (Södergren, 2021). Next, because attitudes towards brands derive, to some extent, from the level of self-congruity, being perceived as a brand aligned with consumers' own set of values will expectedly strengthen its image. Hence, in a CPB context:

H5a. The relationship of cause-brand congruence and brand image is mediated by self-brand congruity.

H5b. The relationship of cause-brand authenticity and brand image is mediated by self-brand congruity.

Moreover, according to SGT, consumers behave in ways consistent with how they see themselves so that they feel motivated to be loyal to brands that construct and reinforce their self-perceptions (Tuškej *et al.*, 2013). For instance, recent research identifies that consumer-brand identification helps explain consumer responses to brand activism (Haupt *et al.*, 2023). Hence, in a CPB context:

H6. Self-brand congruity positively influences (a) purchase and (b) recommendation intentions.

The moderating role of consumer-cause congruence

Consumers typically prefer brands that align with their current or desired self-concept (Key *et al.*, 2023). Likewise, it is reasonable to expect that CPB will influence attitudes and behaviours towards a brand differently according to the congruence between consumers' self-concept and the supported cause/purpose (Chowdhury and Khare, 2011; Pimentel *et al.*, 2024). Several terms related with consumer-cause congruence have been suggested in the literature. Consumer-cause fit is defined as “consumers' perceived affinity to or liking for a cause” (Sung *et al.*, 2021, p. 791). Similarly, consumer-cause involvement is “the degree to which the consumer finds personally relevant the social cause supported by the brand” (Bigné-Alcañiz *et al.*, 2010, p. 133), whereas target audience fit is the extent to which customers support the purpose of interest (Champlin *et al.*, 2019). Bergkvist and Zhou (2019) refer to consumer-cause fit, consumer-cause involvement and perceived importance of the cause interchangeably, all reflecting consumers perceived personal relevance of the cause and all positively related to brand evaluations.

The CrM literature ascertains that companies should carefully choose causes capable of creating high levels of consumer-cause congruence (Champlin *et al.*, 2019) to maximize the results of the partnership and elicit positive attitudes and intentions towards the brand (Duarte and Silva, 2018). Therefore, CrM effectiveness may depend more on consumers' identification with specific causes than on a general motivation to support social causes (Chowdhury and Khare, 2011). The effect resembles the one found for sponsorships and brand endorsement, where a good fit between the target audience and the event or the celebrity, (respectively), is expected to have a positive effect on brand evaluations (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2019).

This study posits that consumer-cause congruence plays a moderating role on the effects of CPB, likely boosting its effectiveness. Although scarcely researched, this claim finds support in a few CrM studies. Drawing on the elaboration likelihood model (Petty *et al.*, 1983), Bigné-Alcañiz *et al.* (2010) argue that when consumers are more (vs less) involved with a cause or purpose, they will process brand cues (e.g. the credibility of the brand alliance, the genuineness of motivations) more diligently. These cues will then become more accessible to the individual's memory, thus gaining importance as inducers of self-brand congruity through the process of meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989) from the cause to the brand. Moreover, it is also expected that post-attitudes towards the brand (e.g. brand image) will be more strongly improved when consumers are more (vs less) involved with a cause or purpose (Mora *et al.*, 2021). In fact, according to SGT (Sirgy, 1982), consumers find brands compatible with their own self-concept, interests and beliefs more appealing (Verlegh, 2024). As such, a similar moderating effect is expected for CPB – i.e. for cause-brand congruence and authenticity:

H7. Consumer-cause congruence positively moderates cause-brand congruence and cause-brand authenticity effects on (a) self-brand congruity and (b) brand image, with the effects being stronger (weaker) for consumers

with high (vs low to moderate) consumer-cause congruence.

Figure 1 depicts the research framework.

Research methodology

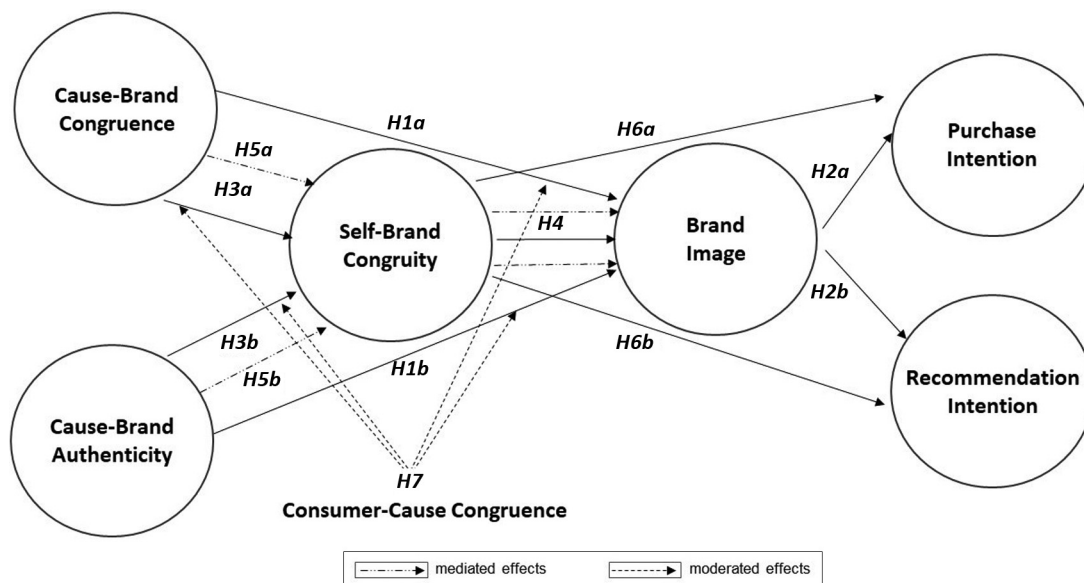
To test the research hypotheses, a survey method was adopted to describe and interpret the relationships among the existing variables. In line with purposive sampling techniques, a sample of respondents belonging to Gen Y and Z, were invited through mail and social media posts to participate. Purposive sampling focuses on intentionally selecting participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the purpose of the study. In this case, Gen Y and Z respondents were chosen given that they are known as the “purpose-driven” generation (Hsu, 2017), and share a desired set of characteristics (more socially aware and more willing to buy from a purpose-driven company than previous generations) which allows them to be better equipped to answer the survey.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents could terminate their participation at any point. A clear initial statement about the research objectives and uses of data was included. In addition, informed consent was obtained, and participants were reassured about maintaining complete privacy and confidentiality. To ensure validity, screening questions were used to assess the eligibility of respondents. When starting the survey, respondents were instructed to choose a familiar brand-purpose pair from a suggested list (Appendix 1) based on prior studies and reports (e.g. Deloitte, 2019; Kantar, 2020), but they could also opt to define/add their own brand-purpose pair. Additionally, respondents needed to have minimal involvement or congruence with the purpose chosen. Respondents then completed the questionnaire with reference to the brand-purpose pair they had selected. The full questionnaire was made available through a web link, taking roughly five minutes to complete.

The questionnaire had 18 mandatory questions based on multi-item scales previously established in the literature, assessed in a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “totally disagree” to “totally agree” (Table 2). Cause-brand congruence was measured with a scale adapted from Joo *et al.* (2019) including items such as “The brand seems to align well with the cause/purpose”, whereas three items (e.g. “The brand support to this cause/purpose is genuine”) adapted from Alhouthi *et al.* (2016) were used to measure cause-brand authenticity. Brand image was measured with a set of items borrowed from Martínez and de Chernatony (2004) and Woisetschläger and Michaelis (2012), whereas three-items borrowed from Stokburger-Sauer *et al.* (2012) and Tuškej *et al.* (2013) were used to measure brand identification. Sample items include “The brand is likeable” and “I feel identified with this brand”, respectively. Finally, intention to purchase and recommend the brand was measured with scales adapted from Napoli *et al.* (2014) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1996), including items such as “It is likely that I will purchase this brand” and “I would recommend this brand to other people”, respectively. Consumer involvement with the cause/purpose – defined as high, moderate or low – was used as a proxy to measure consumer-cause congruence (Bigné-Alcañiz *et al.*, 2010). Demographic information was also collected.

To ensure data quality, necessary controls on the data collection process were implemented, such as preventing each IP address and each device from submitting the questionnaire repeatedly. After removing inappropriate responses (e.g. inconsistent and/or patterned answers), total of 670 responses from Gen Y and Z participants was validated. The sample size was considered adequate to meet the requirements of partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) path analysis and a statistical power higher than 80% (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Respondents’ ages spanned from 18 to 30 years old, with 65.8% belonging to Gen Z (<23 years old) and 34.2% belonging to Gen Y (24–30 years old). Moreover, respondents were mainly female

Figure 1 Research framework



Source: Authors’ own work

Table 2 Measurement scales statistics

Measures	Loading	Mean	SD	α	CR(AVE)
CBC Cause-brand congruence (Joo et al., 2019)				0.903	0.939(0.838)
The brand and the cause/purpose fit together well	0.877	5.702	1.339		
The brand seems to align well with the cause/purpose	0.940	5.577	1.418		
The brand and the cause/purpose seem compatible	0.928	5.780	1.466		
AUT Cause-brand authenticity (Alhouti et al., 2016)				0.902	0.938(0.835)
The brand support to this cause/purpose is genuine	0.914	5.374	1.502		
The brand is being true to itself while supporting this cause/purpose	0.918	5.530	1.536		
By supporting this cause/purpose, the brand stands up for what it believes in	0.910	5.543	1.533		
<i>Considering the association between the brand and the cause...</i>					
BIM Brand image (Martínez and de Chernatony, 2004; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012)				0.837	0.902(0.754)
This brand is interesting	0.855	5.830	1.314		
This brand is attractive	0.851	5.899	1.189		
This brand is likeable	0.898	5.226	1.634		
SBC Self-brand congruity (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Tuškej et al., 2013)				0.840	0.904(0.758)
This brand embodies what I believe in	0.880	4.390	1.660		
I feel identified with this brand	0.859	5.674	1.349		
I feel that my values and the values of this brand are very similar	0.874	5.482	1.500		
INP Intention to purchase (Napoli et al., 2014)				0.865	0.918(0.788)
It is likely that I will purchase this brand	0.894	4.986	1.559		
I would consider buying this brand the next time I need this type of product	0.898	4.860	1.604		
I would definitely try this brand	0.871	4.295	1.568		
INR Intention to recommend (Zeithaml et al., 1996)				0.943	0.963(0.898)
I would recommend this brand to other people	0.960	5.509	1.380		
I would say positive things about this brand to other people	0.934	5.598	1.470		
I would encourage friends and relatives to try this brand	0.947	5.395	1.420		

Source: Authors' own work

(74.4%), which corresponds with the population of interest, because women were found to feel a stronger connection to purpose-driven companies (CONE/Porter Novelli, 2018) and be more socially aware (Amawate and Deb, 2021) than men. Additionally, most respondents (43%) declared feeling highly involved with the selected cause/purpose (when compared with 40% and 17% moderately or poorly involved, respectively), which is in line with the profile of Gen Z and Y, who are considered more socially aware than previous generations (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2019). Regarding self-selected brand-purpose pairs, Nike/Equality and Non-Discrimination (25.6%), The Body Shop/Forever Against Animal Testing (18.4%) and Dove/Self-Esteem (18.1%) were among the most selected.

PLS-SEM using Smart PLS 3.0 software was used. PLS-SEM is a robust modelling technique, well-suited for assessing complex predictive models and testing the strength of relationships between latent variables (Hair et al., 2014).

Results

Composite measures of identified factors are unidimensional and demonstrate good scale reliability according to accepted standards (Nunnally, 1978). All factors show strong Cronbach's alpha, whereas composite reliabilities (CR) and average variances extracted are above recommended minimums of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively (Fornell and Larcker,

1981). Thus, all factors demonstrate good internal consistency and high levels of convergence (Table 2).

To reduce potential common method bias (CMB), the survey used existing scales, counterbalanced the order of the measurement variables and ensured respondents' anonymity (Podsakoff et al., 2012). In addition, CMB was examined by performing the Harman's single-factor test (Harman, 1976), which showed that the highest variance explained by one factor was below the threshold of 50%. Moreover, the full collinearity assessment approach (Kock, 2015) resulted in VIF values below the 3.3 threshold, meaning that the model can be considered free of CMB. Finally, the correlation matrix (Table 3) does not indicate any highly correlated factors, whereas according to Pavlou et al. (2007), evidence of CMB should have resulted in extremely

Table 3 Discriminant validity and correlation matrix

Construct	AVE	CBC	AUT	BIM	SBC	INP	INR
CBC	0.838	0.916					
AUT	0.835	0.784	0.914				
BIM	0.754	0.672	0.700	0.868			
SBC	0.758	0.655	0.699	0.750	0.871		
INP	0.788	0.490	0.504	0.573	0.536	0.887	
INR	0.898	0.594	0.615	0.686	0.645	0.681	0.947

Notes: Diagonals are the AVE square root of each factor; remaining figures represent correlations

Source: Authors' own work

Table 4 Overview of direct effects

Hip	Direct paths	β	p	t	Result
H1a	Cause-brand congruence → Brand image	0.299	0.000	4.959	Yes
H1b	Cause-brand authenticity → Brand image	0.536	0.000	9.247	Yes
H2a	Brand image → Purchase intention	0.476	0.000	7.626	Yes
H2b	Brand image → Recomm intention	0.551	0.000	10.692	Yes
H3a	Cause-brand congruence → Self-brand congruity	0.221	0.000	3.628	Yes
H3b	Cause-brand authenticity → Self-brand congruity	0.604	0.000	10.651	Yes
H4	Self-brand congruity → Brand image	0.561	0.000	13.754	Yes
H6a	Self-brand congruity → Purchase intention	0.232	0.000	3.759	Yes
H6b	Self-brand congruity → Recomm intention	0.276	0.000	5.448	Yes

Source: Authors' own work

high correlations ($r > 0.90$). Therefore, CMB is not considered to be a serious threat to the analyses. Finally, the bootstrapped standardized root mean square residual value is 0.052, below the 0.08 threshold, suggesting an adequate model fit.

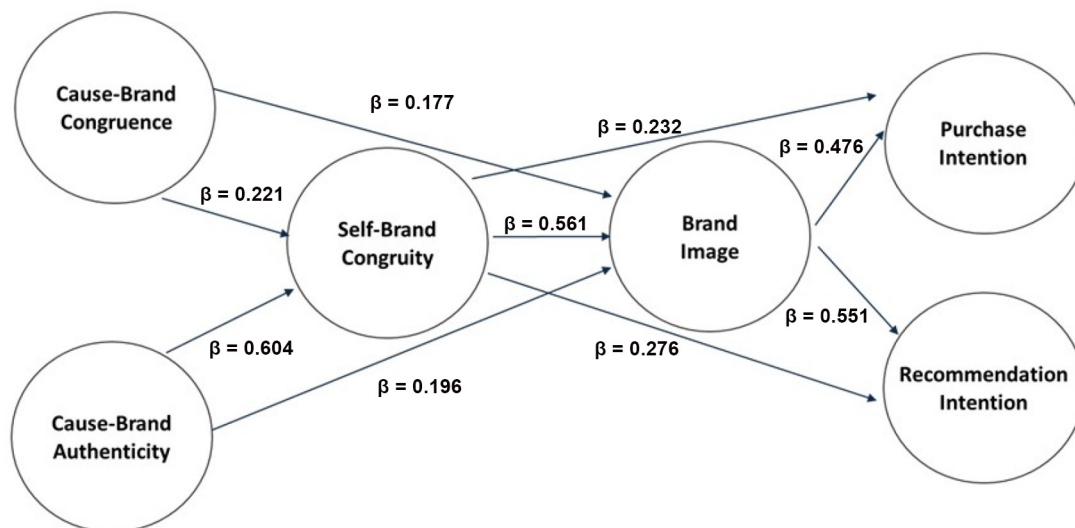
The structural model was estimated through a bootstrap resampling tool to determine path significances (Figure 1). Gender (Male = 0, Female = 1) was tested as a control variable given the unbalanced proportion of women in the sample (Cayolla et al., 2023) and the risk of introducing some bias into both the study and its interpretation. The impact of gender was not statistically significant, suggesting that this variable did not introduce bias into the study.

The results (Table 4) provide support for H1a, H1b and H2, with a significant ($p < 0.05$; $t > 1.96$) effect of cause-brand congruence ($\beta = 0.300$) and authenticity ($\beta = 0.535$) on brand image, which in turn significantly impacts purchase ($\beta = 0.476$) and recommendation ($\beta = 0.551$) intentions. Support was also found for H3a and H3b, with a significant, direct positive effect of cause-brand congruence ($\beta = 0.221$) and authenticity ($\beta = 0.604$) on self-brand congruity. Finally, support was found for H4, H6a and H6b, with self-brand congruity exerting a

significant, direct positive effect on brand image ($\beta = 0.561$), as well as consumers' intentions to purchase ($\beta = 0.232$) and recommend ($\beta = 0.276$) the brand (Figure 2).

Regarding the indirect effects, the proposed framework further suggested that self-brand congruity mediates the cause-brand congruence (H5a) and authenticity (H5b) to brand image paths. A mediation analysis was conducted by applying a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher and Hayes, 2004) based on 5,000 samples. The findings (Table 5) confirm a significant total effect (i.e. without controlling for mediating effects) of cause-brand congruence ($\beta = 0.300$) and authenticity ($\beta = 0.535$) on brand image. The results further suggest that self-brand congruity partially mediates the cause-brand congruence to brand image path (indirect effect: $\beta = 0.123$; $p = 0.001$), because the direct effect remains significant ($\beta = 0.177$, $p = 0.001$). The same happens regarding the cause-brand authenticity to brand image path (indirect effect: $\beta = 0.339$, $p = 0.000$); in this case the direct effect is lower, but still significant ($\beta = 0.196$, $p = 0.001$), when controlling for self-brand congruity. Overall, the results indicate that the full structural model explains 46.7% of the variance in purchase

Figure 2 PLS results for the full structural model



Note: For simplicity, indirect effects are not depicted on this figure (please refer to Table 5)

Source: Authors' own work

Table 5 Direct, indirect and total effects

Effect Path	Direct			Indirect			Total		
	β	p	t	β	p	t	β	p	t
Cause-brand congruence → Brand image	0.177	0.001	3.218	0.123	0.001	3.385	0.300	0.000	4.996
Cause-brand authenticity → Brand image	0.196	0.001	3.408	0.339	0.000	8.695	0.535	0.000	9.278
Self-brand congruity → Purchase intention	0.232	0.000	3.759	0.267	0.000	6.603	0.499	0.000	13.754
Self-brand congruity → Recomm intention	0.276	0.000	5.488	0.309	0.000	8.978	0.585	0.000	16.763

Source: Authors' own work

intention, 63.7% of willingness to recommend, 76.9% of brand image and 64.7% of self-brand congruity.

Finally, to verify *H7*, a multigroup analysis was performed (Henseler et al., 2009). The sample was split into two groups: respondents highly (Group 1; $n = 288$) or poorly/moderately (Group 2; $n = 382$) involved/congruent with the cause/purpose. Respondents' profiles were similar in both data sets (Appendix 2), as required for comparability of Group 1 (mean age: 22.2; females: 78.1%; graduates: 36.2%) and Group 2 (mean age: 23.9; females: 71.6% graduates: 39.7%). Separate models were then estimated for each group to assess whether the group specific path coefficients differed significantly. Bootstrap estimates were used to assess the robustness of group-specific parameter estimates. The results (Table 6) show differences regarding the direct impact of cause-brand congruence on brand image, which becomes non-significant for Group 1 ($\beta = 0.105$; $p = 0.186$). When it comes to Group 1, the effect of cause-brand congruence on brand image only becomes significant when mediated by self-brand congruity. Overall, for Group 2, cause-brand congruence has a stronger total effect (direct+indirect) on brand image ($\beta = 0.369$), when compared to Group 1 ($\beta = 0.219$). No differences were found regarding indirect effects either. As such, the results fail to support *H7a* and *H7b*.

Discussion

This study sought to better understand the key drivers of a successful CPB strategy and what is their impact on brand outcomes. The results emphasize the importance of

authenticity, as well as the tripartite effect of cause-brand-consumer congruences on purchasing and recommendation behaviours of conscientious purpose-driven brands.

The role of cause-brand authenticity. Firstly, this research shows the dominant role of cause-brand authenticity (*H1b*) in a CPB context, when compared to fit (*H1a*). Findings thus challenge the hegemony of cause-brand congruence as a key driver of brand outcomes in prior endorsement (e.g. Kamins, 1990), brand extension (e.g. Spiggle et al., 2012) and cause-related (e.g. Nan and Heo, 2007) traditional research. The two concepts differ significantly: while congruence does not consider how genuine the association is perceived to be, authenticity refers to consumers' beliefs concerning the brand's underlying motivations, namely, if these initiatives are sincere or a mere marketing ploy to mislead and alienate consumers.

This should be particularly relevant for CPB, often accused of being inauthentic in their social stands (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Rohmanue and Jacobi, 2024). Recent reports on brand purpose suggest that authenticity may in fact overrule fit (Ferguson et al., 2017) and this study offers empirical support to these *ad hoc* findings. Although traditionally the cause should be aligned with what the brand sells, today young consumers consider more important that brands genuinely care about the societal issues they support. As such, in a CPB strategy not only a match between the brand and the cause should exist but, first and foremost, brands' claims and actions should be consistent in a way that consumers perceive the association as authentic, genuine and truthful (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Table 6 PLS multigroup analysis

Direct paths	Group 1 ($n = 288$)	Group 2 ($n = 382$)	Sig. Diff.
Cause-brand congruence → Brand image	0.105*	0.221	No
Cause-brand authenticity → Brand image	0.190	0.203	No
Brand image → Purchase intention	0.647	0.508	No
Brand image → Recomm intention	0.525	0.398	No
Cause-brand congruence → Self-brand congruity	0.192	0.249	No
Cause-brand authenticity → Self-brand congruity	0.655	0.517	No
Self-brand congruity → Brand image	0.539	0.592	No
Self-brand congruity → Purchase intention	0.194	0.296	No
Self-brand congruity → Recomm intention	0.171	0.234	No
<i>Indirect paths</i>			
Cause-brand congruence → Brand image	0.114	0.148	No
Cause-brand authenticity → Brand image	0.353	0.306	No
Self-brand congruity → Purchase intention	0.283	0.236	No
Self-brand congruity → Recomm intention	0.349	0.242	No

Notes: (i) The column "Sig. Diff" shows whether the correspondent path coefficients significantly differ between groups; (ii) * Non-significant path ($p > 0.05$)

Source: Authors' own work

The role of consumer-based congruences. The results also show that, besides cause-brand congruence, consumer-brand and consumer-cause congruencies help explain consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards the cause-supporting brand. Findings thus highlight that CPB involves three active entities and are not just an association between a brand and a cause. While jointly examining these tripartite effects, this study allows for a better understanding of the role of consumers' psychological mechanisms and of how the process from CPB efforts to brand outcomes unfolds.

The first psychological mechanism refers to *self-brand congruity*. The results show that cause-brand congruence and authenticity positively impact brand image not only directly (*H1a*, *H1b*), but also indirectly through congruence between the consumer and the brand (*H5a*, *H5b*). When it comes to authenticity, indirect effects (mediated by self-brand congruity) account for the majority of total effects, further validating the relevance of this mediating mechanism, which unfolds in two steps.

Firstly, and as predicted (*H3a*, *H3b*), a direct impact of cause-brand congruence and authenticity on self-brand congruity occurs. Theoretically, this finding is consistent with McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model that suggests that consumers use brand-related meanings to partly shape an individual sense of self (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015). The transfer process is facilitated when congruence exists between the brand and a higher-order purpose (Joo *et al.*, 2019; Muniz and Guzmán, 2021) as this congruence is likely to reinforce consumers' self-brand connection, sense of belonging and identification through their shared values (Albert *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, brands that genuinely show what they stand for are important for consumers' identity, as they become "symbolic resources for self-expression" (Södergren, 2021). Additionally, the results are broadly consistent with SGT, which posits that consumers use brands in general to fulfil self-definitional needs (Sirgy *et al.*, 2016). According to SGT, consumers who perceive their own values as similar will be attracted to the brand as a source of self-definition (Golob and Podnar, 2019). Secondly, the findings reveal that self-brand congruity impacts brand image (*H4*), complementing the literature on self-concept (Sirgy, 1982) and congruity (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). The results compare favourably with past literature which posits that, given consumers' need for self-consistency, high self-brand congruity is likely to enhance positive attitudes towards the brand (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Moreover, according to SGT, the fulfilment of consumer self-definitional needs potentially has implications for consumer brand evaluations. The results of this study extend prior findings indicating that, by following CPB efforts, brand image is strengthened not only due to the cause and the brand, but also to the impact on a third entity, the consumer, that is proven to play an active role in the effectiveness of this strategy. Brand image will, in turn, lead to positive behavioural intentions (*H6a*, *H6b*).

The second psychological mechanism regards *consumer-cause congruence*, which works as a boundary condition in our research. The findings show that the process from CPB efforts to brand outcomes may unfold differently according to the level of consumer-cause congruence. First, and unlike initial predictions (*H7*), higher levels of consumer-cause affinity did not strengthen cause-brand congruence and cause-brand

authenticity effects when compared to weaker levels of congruence. As such, although consumers are expected to be more likely drawn to brands that share their own important goals in life (Fletcher-Brown *et al.*, 2024), CPB appears to be equally successful for consumers either highly or lowly involved with the cause/purpose.

The results however also show that, for higher levels of consumer-cause affinity, cause-brand congruence does not directly enhance brand image. As such, cause-brand congruence only seems to truly boost the effectiveness of CPB strategies when consumers hold weak or neutral levels of congruence with the cause. When consumers display high levels of cause affinity, these strategies will likely be successful regardless of the level of cause-brand congruence, which becomes less of a strategic issue. Although the literature places a strong emphasis on fit, it is possible to find some discrepancies and empirical evidence consistent with these findings. For example, past research on influencer marketing reveals that when followers feel an interpersonal connection with the influencer, this will surpass the need for congruence between the brand and the influencer, which becomes irrelevant (Breves *et al.*, 2019). Literature on co-branding finds that when consumers feel high affinity with the core brand, they will more easily accept a low fit regarding its extension (Keller and Aaker, 1992). Research on charity donations suggests that cause-brand congruence is likely to have a higher impact on brand evaluations for customers with low cause affinity as they are more detached from the cause and may be more concerned about fit (Barone *et al.*, 2007). These studies underline that a pre-existing consumer affinity with one of the parties may overshadow the need for fit between partners. As such, for consumers with high cause affinity, CPB efforts work mostly through the effect of authenticity on brand image, while cause-brand congruence only impacts brand image indirectly through self-brand congruity. For consumers holding a weak/moderate cause affinity, the effect of authenticity is still dominant but fit also plays a significant role, while impacting brand image both directly and indirectly. Key managerial implications of these findings are discussed further ahead.

Theoretical contributions

Theoretical contributions are manifold. Firstly, the study contributes to a better understanding of how and when is CPB effective, as well as of its impact on consumption behaviour (MSI, 2022). While doing so, this study draws on self-congruity and meaning transfer theories, jointly extending branding and cause-related research to the context of purpose-driven marketing.

Secondly, this research emphasizes the importance of authenticity for purchasing and recommendation of behaviours of conscientious purpose-driven brands. While previous research on CrM and CSR has considered cause-brand fit as critical to yield positive consumer responses, the research findings provide an alternative path based on cause-brand authenticity to explain the effect of CPB on brand outcomes, which has so far remained under-researched (Joo *et al.*, 2019; Markovic *et al.*, 2022). The study concludes that brands should support a cause that the consumer cares about, even if it does not necessarily show an obvious fit with the brand, so long as

brands are perceived as being genuine and authentic. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first time this insight is empirically validated in a CPB context.

Thirdly, this study adds to existing research by examining the joint effects of cause–brand–consumer congruence in CPB. While a few similar attempts have been made in the co-branding (Broderick *et al.*, 2003) and endorsement (Belanche *et al.*, 2021) literature, most research on CrM has not studied consumers' role as active contributors to the effectiveness of cause-related strategies. However, in a CPB context, it is reasonable to expect that consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards the brand depend not only on the cause-brand association but also on consumers' own connections with these two agents. This study elaborates on previous established relationships between cause-related efforts and brand outcomes and examines how the process unfolds through the mediating role of self-brand congruity and the moderating role of consumer-cause congruence. Since no known study has yet examined these three types of congruencies simultaneously in a single framework, this research contributes to the existing literature by offering an integrated, triadic view of CPB.

Finally, while adopting this triadic view, the study reveals that in the case of consumers highly involved with the cause, CPB strategies will likely be successful regardless of the level of fit between the brand and the cause, which becomes less of a strategic issue. These results contradict prior findings regarding a positive moderating role of consumer-cause congruence regarding the effect of CPB efforts. These findings also address recent calls (e.g. Ahmad *et al.*, 2022) to analyse if and how the effectiveness of this branding strategy is affected by the congruency between consumers and the purpose supported by the brand.

Managerial implications

The way consumers are interacting with brands is changing and existing perspectives about the role of brands in the contemporary society need to be rethought (Golob *et al.*, 2020; Parris and Guzmán, 2023), with purpose being indicated as the key concept for brands in the 21st century (Hajdas and Kleczek, 2021). This study provides insights for managers who wish to successfully use CPB to improve brand image and strengthen the consumer-brand relationship in terms of purchasing and recommendation intentions, particularly among a new generation of consumers. The results suggest that purpose-led branding appears to be successful for consumers either highly or poorly affiliated with the cause/purpose, which is particularly relevant to marketers. Moreover, this study questions the hegemony of cause-brand congruence, typically considered as critical to yield positive consumer responses and validates the strategic role of other, less explored, drivers of CPB effectiveness, such as cause-brand authenticity, self-brand congruity and cause-consumer congruence. These findings have four important practical implications for brand managers.

Walking the talk: shaping perceptions of purpose-led branding authenticity

The findings reveal that authenticity is a key issue for brands following a CPB strategy, surpassing cause-brand fit, a result well aligned with the values of young consumers, who crave

what is real and genuine (Södergren, 2021) and who are digitally empowered to (dis)confirm brands' purpose messages on social media (Campagna *et al.*, 2022). Traditionally, in a cause-related domain, managers strive to ensure a connection between the brand and the cause, based on the similarity/relevance of features/benefits. The findings confirm that this match facilitates meaning transfer and yields positive effects in brand image, in line with prior research. However, its impacts on attitudes and behaviours towards the cause-supporting brand are limited when compared with authenticity, particularly when it comes to target audiences highly affiliated with the cause. This may help to explain why some associations are highly effective and successful regardless of an obvious, perfect fit (Osorio *et al.*, 2022). For example, the ice cream brand Ben and Jerry's donates 7.5% of pre-tax profits to support social causes apparently unrelated to frozen desserts, such as voting rights or refugees' support (Key *et al.*, 2023; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

Hence, and considering consumer ambivalence regarding such initiatives, brands are advised to emphasize their interest in truly benefitting society by dedicating their attention and energy to their purpose, instead of overrating fit or showing their support simply through advertising or a mere rhetorical commitment (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022). To a digitally empowered generation, when a brand's conscientious purpose-driven messages and practices are consistent, their social media posts will be perceived as authentic; in turn, this will likely encourage consumers to voluntarily comment and share them with their peers, ultimately leading to positive brand attitudes and marketing outcomes. Hence, consumers can potentially gain agency through collective advocacy on social media and should thus be considered and involved in brands' communication strategy (Fletcher-Brown *et al.*, 2024). In other words, as they are more willing to engage with meaningful causes on social media than prior generations (Narayanan, 2022), digital natives may serve as social catalysts for increasing CPB effectiveness and authenticity through their active social media participation.

Beyond trends: identifying the right purpose to commit to in the long term

While "walking the talk", brands may thus be more likely perceived as authentic, instead of guided by a mere search for publicity or goodwill (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). For example, Patagonia has built its entire reputation as a brand that lives its purpose (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022), from products to company culture, including the donation of 1% of total annual sales to environmental organisations. In a bold move, Patagonia has recently announced that it is giving away its US \$3bn company towards climate-change effort. Patagonia has been supporting environmental causes since 1985, long before it was a trendy topic. Nevertheless, a backlash might still occur, as these initiatives are likely to activate more opponents than supporters (Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022) and alienate some consumer segments (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022). For instance, many cause supporting brands have been accused of opportunistically "riding on the back" of social movements (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022; Verlegh, 2024). With the expansion of social media as the main arena for consumers' discussions with and about brands, these issues have become more important than ever: brand content

that comes across as inauthentic can quickly turn off consumers and generate viral negative feedback (Campagna *et al.*, 2022). For instance, when Nike twisted its famous slogan and told its fans “Don’t Do It”, it was accused – all over social media and beyond – of jumping on the bandwagon of the Black Lives Matter movement (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022), despite the brand’s long history of promoting equality and non-discrimination. Hence, brand managers are advised to identify the right purpose to commit to in the long term (ideally permanently), even if it is not associated to a trendy movement (Wannow *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, understanding what triggers opponents, the broader debate they are about to enter and the most typical counterarguments may be critical for brands to deliver integrated messages and practices that more authentically address the chosen purpose.

More than fit: connecting with consumers and to what matters to them

Based on the findings, managers should acknowledge that CPB is not simply a brand-cause alliance, but that consumers’ congruency with the brand and the cause also plays a role. Connecting with consumers and to what matters to them may thus be more relevant than to be aligned with what the brand sells. In line with SGT, the findings show that CPB works through self-brand congruity, as consumers use congruent and authentic cause-brand associations to enhance or convey their identity. Again, this highly resonates with the values of young consumers, who prefer brands that match their sense of self (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015). Considering that generational cohorts like Gen Z are in the verge of becoming the world’s largest consumer segment, exhibit high purchasing power, keep up with the latest social media trends and voice their personal views on topics they are involved with (Narayanan, 2022), brands capable of building congruent and authentic associations with a meaningful purpose have a huge potential to develop a positive and engaging relationship with these consumers. A key managerial implication of this finding is that CPB may entail a dual strategic return, not only regarding brand image and behaviours, but also stronger consumer-brand relationships, while closely connecting with consumers’ identity (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022).

Segmenting consumers based on their alignment with brand and cause

Finally, managerial decision-making entails the selection of an appropriate purpose. This study suggests that brand managers should adapt their decisions to consumers with differing levels of cause congruence – i.e. the level of consumer-cause congruence is a relevant segmentation variable to better explain the effectiveness of CPB. Even though this strategy has a positive impact on brand outcomes for consumers either highly or poorly involved with the cause/purpose, the underlying process is contingent to consumer-cause congruence.

Hence, when developing a CPB strategy, managers should first assess consumer perceptions of both the cause and the brand to choose the purpose that best resonates with the target audience. For consumers with less affinity with the cause, although authenticity is a key driver, congruence with the brand still plays a significant role. As such, brands wishing to reach a wider audience, less engaged with the cause, should

not only focus on demonstrating authenticity, but also choose a purpose that fits the brand’s positioning, as it will boost effectiveness. This might be the case of brands with a huge consumer base (e.g. Nike), with different belief systems and sociopolitical ideologies (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022). As a well-recognized inclusive brand, Nike invests on leveraging the brand for social impact through its positioning, based on the power of sports (Rodríguez-Vilá *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, when a certain purpose aligns well with key target market groups, cause-brand fit becomes less of a strategic issue; otherwise, the brand should exercise caution in choosing a cause and try to ensure that fits the brand’s positioning and core business. As the success of CPB depends, to a certain extent, to the involvement segment the consumer belongs to, different messages should be adapted for each one for congruence – e.g. social media campaigns may engage different consumer profiles through effective data-driven strategies (Mora *et al.*, 2021).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

A purposive sample of young adults belonging to generations Y and Z, representative of the “purpose-driven” generation (Hsu, 2017), was used, including mainly young females and respondents 23 years old or younger, from one Western European country. Although this was partly an intentional compromise given that the target was deemed relevant for this study, generalizations should be taken with caution and future studies should use more balanced samples and extend research to other countries. Moreover, although findings were validated across a diverse set of brands and causes, respondents selected purpose-driven brands according to the guidelines and examples provided by the researchers. While this allowed researchers to have a better control over the selected brands and a better guarantee that respondents accurately chose purpose-driven brands with which they were somehow familiar and involved with, in future studies brands could be self-selected to enhance external validity.

Another limitation of this study relates to the use of real brands. Even though a real brand adds realism to the perceptions of CPB efforts, it also generates a condition in which prior knowledge may bias respondents’ evaluations. Consequently, further research should replicate this study with fictional brands, controlling for the effect of consumer prior brand knowledge. Furthermore, this study assumes a minimal level of positive consumer involvement with the purpose chosen by the brand; however, situations where the brand supports a purpose that the consumer opposes should also be explored in future studies. Finally, this research intentionally focused solely on the positive side of CPB. All hypotheses were built under the assumption of positive impacts with the goal to understand the relative importance of each driver. However, CPB might generate potential backlash from some consumers and have negative effects on certain brand outcomes. In line with calls to study the negative effects of branding (Brandão *et al.*, 2023; Dessart *et al.*, 2020; Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017), future research exploring the negative aspects of CPB is warranted.

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Appendix 1

Table A1 Indicative examples of brand-purpose pairs included in this study

Brand/purpose pairs	Description
Nike/Equality and non-discrimination	Nike has consistently fought against social issues that prevent people from maximizing their full potential (such as gender and racial inequalities), leveraging the brand for impact through diversity, inclusion and the power of sports. In 2018, Nike earned significant media attention with its Colin Kaepernick campaign showing support for his racial justice movement
The Body Shop/Forever against animal testing	The Body Shop is a well-known cruelty-free cosmetics brand company. In 1989, it was the first international beauty brand to campaign against the use of animal testing, partnering with cruelty-free international. Innovative and effective cruelty-free ingredients are used in their products
Dove/Self-esteem	Through the self-esteem project, the personal care brand Dove has been committed to promoting real beauty and body confidence, with the “Real Beauty” campaign first launched in 2004. The Dove self-esteem project benefits 17 million people in over 100 countries
Patagonia/Environment	Patagonia is an outdoor apparel brand that was born out of purpose. Patagonia has been an active supporter of environmental causes since 1985, from products to company culture, including the donation of 1% of total annual sales to grassroots environmental groups
Lush/Sustainability and animal cruelty-free	Purpose is at the heart of Lush. It supports a global ban of animal testing on cosmetics, and stands for sustainability, aiming to become a full circular business. Lush’s products are handmade, use ethically sourced ingredients and are package-free (or “naked”)
Avon/For women	For 135 years the beauty brand Avon has been creating positive change for women. Since 1955, the Avon Foundation runs programs that allow women and their families to lead safe and healthy lives. Among them, the breast cancer promise aims to educate and promote awareness about breast health

Source: Authors’ own work

Appendix 2

Table A2 Multigroup analysis: measurement scales statistics for Group 1 and Group 2

Measures	Loadings		Mean		StDev	
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2
CBC cause-brand congruence (Joo <i>et al.</i> , 2019)						
The brand and the cause/purpose fit together well	0.900	0.816	5.625	5.634	1.472	1.117
The brand seems to align well with the cause/purpose	0.942	0.899	5.643	5.821	1.542	1.216
The brand and the cause/purpose seem compatible	0.948	0.922	5.670	5.582	1.588	1.269
AUT cause-brand authenticity (Alhouti <i>et al.</i> , 2016)						
The brand support to this cause/purpose is genuine	0.927	0.899	5.538	5.505	1.629	1.343
The brand is being true to itself while supporting this cause/purpose	0.926	0.873	5.543	5.513	1.656	1.342
By supporting this cause/purpose, the brand stands up for what it believes in <i>Considering the association between the brand and the cause/purpose...</i>	0.930	0.876	5.333	5.403	1.673	1.303
BIM brand image (Martínez and de Chernatony, 2004; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012)						
This brand is interesting	0.875	0.816	5.728	5.747	1.354	1.254
This brand is attractive	0.848	0.857	5.795	5.788	1.267	1.060
This brand is likeable	0.907	0.883	5.693	5.172	1.565	1.423
SBC self-brand congruity (Stokburger-Sauer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Tuškej <i>et al.</i> , 2013)						
This brand embodies what I believe in	0.888	0.865	5.093	4.333	1.550	1.523
I feel identified with this brand	0.871	0.829	5.189	5.615	1.452	1.186
I feel that my values and the values of this brand are very similar	0.885	0.848	5.143	5.480	1.567	1.219
INP intention to purchase (Napoli <i>et al.</i> , 2014)						
It is likely that I will purchase this brand	0.885	0.847	4.998	4.993	1.601	1.499
I would consider buying this brand the next time I need this type of product	0.906	0.873	4.905	4.747	1.670	1.505
I would definitely try this brand	0.897	0.896	4.323	4.267	1.655	1.429
INR intention to recommend (Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> , 1996)						
I would recommend this brand to other people	0.942	0.921	5.618	5.527	1.456	1.260
I would say positive things about this brand to other people	0.955	0.937	5.503	5.223	1.482	1.441
I would encourage friends and relatives to try this brand	0.965	0.952	5.573	5.366	1.482	1.319

Notes: Group 1 ($n = 288$): high involvement with the cause/purpose; Group 2 ($n = 382$): poor/moderate involvement with the cause/purpose

Source: Authors' own work

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