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COLA WARS

The Defensive Side of Brand Loyalty

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"Somos mais do que apenas nossos genes. Somos, de alguma forma, um produto das pessoas que nos rodeiam - as pessoas com quem somos forçados a crescer e as pessoas com quem escolhemos ficar mais tarde."
-Robert Kolker

Resumo

Recorrendo à rivalidade entre Coca-Cola e Pepsi, contextualizados na abordagem teórica da identificação social, procurou-se analisar o efeito de informação sobre um comportamento desviante de uma marca na lealdade oposicional, no compromisso com a marca e na atribuição de responsabilidade pelo evento apresentado na informação dada. Foi realizado um estudo experimental com 100 participantes, distribuídos aleatoriamente por duas condições, uma em que a informação era veiculada sobre o ingroup (marca de refrigerante preferida) ou sobre o outgroup (marca rival).

Os resultados demonstraram associações positivas entre a identificação com a comunidade da marca, o compromisso com a marca e a lealdade oposicional, particularmente na condição ingroup, reforçando a relevância dos processos identitários no contexto do consumo. O alinhamento político esteve também associado à atribuição de responsabilidade e à concordância com os despedimentos (tópico da informação), sendo que participantes com uma orientação mais à esquerda tenderam a atribuir maior responsabilidade a atores institucionais e a apresentar menor concordância com os despedimentos. De forma geral, os resultados sustentam a ideia de que a informação sobre comportamento negativo da marca endogrupal aumenta comportamentos mais defensivos, o compromisso com a marca e a lealdade oposicional, sugerindo que esta informação é percebida como uma atitude difamatória, ameaçadora à imagem positiva do endogrupo.

Palavras-chave: Difamação; Teoria da Identidade Social; identificação com a comunidade da marca; compromisso com a marca; lealdade oposicional; comportamento do consumidor.

Abstract

Drawing on the rivalry between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, contextualized within the theoretical framework of social identification, this study aimed to examine the effect of information about a brand's deviant behavior on oppositional loyalty, brand commitment, and responsibility attribution for the event presented in the information provided. An experimental study was conducted with 100 participants, who were randomly assigned to two conditions: one in which the information concerned the ingroup (the participant's preferred soft drink brand) and another in which it concerned the outgroup (the rival brand).

The results demonstrated positive associations between identification with the brand community, brand commitment, and oppositional loyalty, particularly in the ingroup condition, reinforcing the relevance of identity processes in the context of consumption. Political alignment was also associated with responsibility attribution and agreement with the dismissals (the topic of the information), with participants holding a more left-wing orientation tending to attribute greater responsibility to institutional actors and to show lower levels of agreement with the dismissals. Overall, the findings support the idea that information about negative behavior by an ingroup brand increases more defensive behaviors, brand commitment, and oppositional loyalty, suggesting that such information is perceived as a defamatory and threatening attitude toward the positive image of the ingroup.

Keywords: Defamation; Social Identity Theory; brand community identification; brand commitment; oppositional brand loyalty; consumer behavior.

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Introduction

Coca-Cola dominated the soft drink market from the 1950s until the beginning of the 1970s (Saeidinia et al., 2012), until the emergence and growth of the brand now known as Pepsi. This marked the beginning of a rivalry that continues to this day, with marketing campaigns aimed at attacking and challenging the competing brand, in what became known as the *Cola Wars (*Pope, 1981).

The second point worth highlighting is the strong brand communities and loyalty associated with both brands. Coca-Cola and Pepsi have large and loyal consumer bases, with both brands holding a strong position in the market. As Mariano (2016, p.21) stated, "both brands are well positioned in the Portuguese market and are the main communication competitors among the different cola brands."

It is also worth highlighting the prevalence of these brands in Portugal. According to a study conducted by *Multidados*, Coca-Cola is the most consumed soft drink in Portugal, as well as the soft drink brand most recognized by Portuguese consumers (Dudinha, 2022). Similarly, according to a 2022 study concerning the decrease in soft drink consumption, conducted by the magazine *Grande Consumo* (Sousa, 2022), 74.1% of participants highlighted Coca-Cola, which was also the most recognized brand among participants, with a recognition rate of 67.2%, in contrast with Sumol (38.3%), Lipton (27.4%), and 7UP (19%).

In addition to the historical rivalry between these two brands, another relevant aspect for the present study is the increasing importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies within organizations, specially within the Coca-Cola company and Pepsi.CO. DEI policies are common organizational guidelines in the United States and aim to combat discrimination and provide opportunities to groups that have historically experienced discrimination, based on nationality, gender, race, sexual orientation, and other characteristics.

In 2025, these policies came under attack following the rise to power of United States President Donald J. Trump, who issued an order on January 20 aimed at eliminating this type of policy through the proclamation *Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing* (The White House, 2025). The elimination of these principles was expected to negatively affect a significant portion of the American workforce, particularly individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups.

The implementation of these executive measures was also accompanied by an increase in calls for boycotts of American brands that were perceived as having complied with or been affected by these changes, including Pepsi and Coca-Cola. According to *Forbes (*Murray & Bohannon, 2025), Pepsi began reducing its focus on diversity and inclusion in its hiring practices and changing its internal programs to prioritize employee development and support for small businesses more broadly. The company also moved away from using representation targets in hiring and removed references to a diverse workforce from its social media (Murray & Bohannon, 2025).

Coca-Cola, on the other hand, was reported to have maintained its pro-DEI position, according to *Sustainability* (Williment, 2025). However, according to *TheStreet* (Battle, 2025), the emergence of a video claiming that Coca-Cola was dismissing Latin American employees in order to comply with the new anti-DEI policies led to a boycott of the brand by members of the Latino community, which became associated with the movement known as the "*Latino Freeze Movement*". This type of movements became strongly associated with the political left, particularly due to its opposition to measures established by the U.S. government, which identifies as conservative and right-wing.

The previously mentioned rumors could be interpreted as defamation of the brand from the consumer perspective, an act of deviance that violates the group's shared norms and attitudes

toward the brand. Building on the phenomenon described above, this study aims to examine how identification with brand communities influences individuals' reactions to negative information about their brand, particularly when the information concerns the emergence of ingroup deviant behavior. By conceptualizing brand communities as forms of social identity, the study investigates whether individuals who identify with a brand respond differently to negative information involving their own brand compared with negative information involving an outgroup brand. More specifically, it seeks to explore how identification with the ingroup shapes perceptions and reactions when the brand is associated with negative or deviant behavior.

Social identity theory

Humans naturally categorize themselves into social groups and derive part of their identity from their membership to those groups. This idea forms the foundation of Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986). According to the theory, individuals strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity by identifying with groups that enhance their self-concept.

Tajfel and Turner (1986) propose that Social Identity Theory seeks to explain how individuals develop and maintain a sense of identity through their membership in social groups. The theory encompasses three interrelated processes: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. First, individuals categorize themselves and others into meaningful social groups, such as "us" and "them." Second, they identify with the groups to which they belong, incorporating group membership into their self-concept and perceiving the group as an important part of their identity. Finally, individuals compare their ingroup (us) with relevant outgroups (them), often seeking to establish a positive distinction between the two. This process of positive distinctiveness can contribute to the maintenance or enhancement of self-esteem.

When individuals recognize that a group's values, attitudes, and characteristics reflect their own, they begin to identify with that group. Consequently, group membership becomes

incorporated into their self-concept. Because the group's achievements and reputation are perceived as extensions of the self, individuals are motivated to promote and defend the ingroup (ingroup favoritism), namely through positive comparisons to relevant outgroups.

This process helps explain why people frequently evaluate their own group more positively than other groups. The success of the ingroup contributes to a positive social identity, while criticism or threats directed toward the group may be experienced as threats to the individual's identity.

A clear example can be observed during periods of war. Political propaganda often portrays the nation as superior, more united, or morally justified in comparison with other nations. Such messages strengthen citizens' identification with the nation, reinforce feelings of belonging, and encourage individuals to view the ingroup more favorably than other nations.

Ingroup bias and outgroup hate

Although Social Identity Theory predicts ingroup favoritism, Brewer (1999) questioned whether this favoritism towards the ingroup relative to outgroups, necessarily results in hostility toward outgroups. Drawing on Allport's (1954) work, Brewer argued that *ingroup love* and *outgroup hate* are distinct psychological processes rather than opposite ends of the same continuum. Consequently, individuals may strongly value and favor their own group without simultaneously expressing prejudice or hostility toward other groups.

Brewer (1999) further proposed that conflict plays a crucial moderating role in this relationship. Under conditions of intergroup conflict or competition, positive feelings toward the ingroup are more likely to become associated with hostility toward the outgroup. In these situations, individuals may derogate competing groups while simultaneously enhancing the status of their own group to protect and reinforce a positive social identity.

In summary, Brewer's perspective supports Allport's argument that ingroup love and outgroup hate are not inherently linked.

However, when conflict is introduced, the relationship between ingroup and outgroup evaluations becomes stronger. In such contexts, individuals may display greater hostility toward outgroups while simultaneously enhancing the status of their own group, as a means of maintaining a positive social identity and self-concept. This suggests that responses to criticism and conflict may depend not only on the content of the criticism, but also on the group membership of the person expressing it.

Ingroup Criticism Model

Building on this perspective, Hornsey's Ingroup Criticism Model proposes that individuals are generally more receptive to criticism of their group when it comes from another member of the same group. In other words, the perceived group membership of the critic can influence how criticism is interpreted and received. Meaning the negative information about the ingroup would be more accepted if fomented by the ingroup as the information would be seen as a critic that could contribute to the development of the ingroup. In this sense, criticism from an ingroup member is less likely to be perceived as an attack or a form of intergroup conflict and may instead be interpreted as a constructive tool intended to improve the group. Individuals tend to assume that outsiders criticize their group to harm it, gain an advantage, or demonstrate superiority, whereas criticism from insiders is more likely to be interpreted as motivated by a desire to help and improve the group.

This distinction is particularly relevant when considering the relationship between ingroup identification and reactions toward outgroups. While criticism from an outgroup may reinforce defensive responses and contribute to hostility, criticism from an ingroup member may be more

readily accepted because the individual is perceived as sharing the same group identity (in this case being part of the same brand community) and, therefore, having the group's interests at heart.

Although this model concerns criticism directed at the ingroup, its underlying logic can be extended to the present study. Negative information about the outgroup does not threaten the ingroup's identity and is, moreover, consistent with the motivation to maintain positive intergroup distinctiveness. It is therefore expected to be accepted, and possibly endorsed or amplified (outgroup hate), particularly among highly identified members. Negative information about the ingroup, in contrast, constitutes a threat to the shared identity and should elicit greater defensiveness, unless it is perceived as originating from within the community.

Brand Community and community identification (ingroup identification)

The concept of brand community refers to a group of individuals who develop social relationships based on their admiration and use of a particular brand, product, or service. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017), these communities are characterized by the existence of relationships between their members, which are built around shared interests, values, and consumption experiences.

According to Kaur et al. (2020), drawing on Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, brand communities provide consumers with a context to express and reinforce their identity through group membership. This identification is associated with stronger opposition toward rival brands.

Andersen (2005, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017) suggests that a successful brand community can promote higher levels of brand loyalty. Brand loyalty, in turn, can be understood as a consistent response over time, reflected in the repeated purchase of products from a brand, resulting from positive attitudes and feelings toward it (Mellens et al., 1996, as cited in Ishak & Abd Ghani, 2013).

The concept of brand community identification refers to the extent to which an individual consciously recognizes and identifies with the brand community to which they belong (ingroup) (Mael and Ashforth (1992, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017))

Identification with a brand community develops progressively through interactions between members of the community. The sharing of consumption experiences, values, and meanings associated with the brand contributes to strengthening the bonds between individuals and consolidating their identification with the ingroup (Carlson et al., 2008; McAlexander et al., 2002; Scarpi, 2010; Zhou et al., 2012, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017).

Thus, brand community identification represents an application of Social Identity Theory to the context of consumer behavior and constitutes a fundamental concept for understanding the relationship between brands and groups, which lies at the center of the present investigation.

Oppositional Brand Loyalty

The concept of oppositional brand loyalty describes a phenomenon in which members of a brand community not only demonstrate high levels of loyalty toward their preferred brand but also develop negative attitudes toward competing brands (Muniz & Hamer, 2001), consistent with the notion of outgroup hate (Brewer, 1999).

Individuals who display this type of loyalty are characterized simultaneously by a strong connection to their preferred brand and deliberate opposition to the rival brand. This opposition may manifest itself through criticism, rejection, or hostile attitudes toward both the rival brand and its consumers (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Thomson & Sinha, 2008, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017).

This suggests that brand loyalty is not limited to favorable behaviors toward the preferred brand but may also involve unfavorable behaviors directed toward competing brands.

Muniz and Hamer (2001) observed this phenomenon among consumer communities of Pepsi and Coca-Cola, identifying rivalry between the two groups. This example is particularly relevant to the present investigation, as it demonstrates how identification with a brand can influence not only attitudes toward the ingroup (increase in brand commitment), but also perceptions and behaviors directed toward the outgroup (increase in oppositional brand loyalty)

Brand Commitment

Brand commitment can be defined as what leads consumers to maintain a close relationship with a brand, making it their primary choice within its category, according to Coulter et al. (2003, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017).

This conscious decision to commit to a brand leads consumers to become more open to changes made by that same brand (Pillai & Goldsmith, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017), while reducing their susceptibility to messages from rival brands (Raju et al., 2009, as cited in Kuo & Hou, 2017). As a result, committed consumers are less likely to abandon their preferred brand in favor of another. This can easily be seen with the brands used in this study and their monopoly on the Coca-Cola flavored soft drinks.

In this way, brand commitment constitutes a fundamental element in maintaining the relationship between the consumer and the brand. For consumers, this relationship contributes to reducing the perceived risk associated with the purchase decision process; for the brand, it represents greater stability within its customer base and lower vulnerability to competitors (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002, as cited in Osuna Ramírez et al., 2017).

Overview and hypotheses

The theoretical perspectives discussed above suggest that individuals' identification with a group could become particularly relevant when that group is confronted with a threat or conflict such as negative information about the ingroup. In such situations, individuals may strengthen

their identification with the ingroup and engage in behaviors aimed at protecting or enhancing the group's positive image.

These processes can also be applied to consumer groups, particularly brand communities, in which individuals share a sense of identity and belonging based on their relationship with a brand. When a brand is negatively portrayed by an external source, this may be perceived as a threat to the group with which individuals identify. In consequence, members of the brand community may respond by strengthening their identification with the community and becoming more supportive of the brand. However, and on the contrary, when the rival brand is negatively portrayed by an external source, this information does not threaten the ingroup's identity and may instead be perceived as confirming its relative superiority. Members of the brand community are therefore likely to be more receptive to such information and to endorse it, which may, in turn, foster more negative attitudes and greater hostility towards the rival brand, in line with the motivation to maintain a positive and distinctive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

This apparent ambivalence regarding the potential results led us to the present study. Based on this reasoning, the present study investigates whether negative external information about a brand can strengthen identification with its brand community. The research question is therefore: Does negative external information about a brand lead to defensive ingroup identification strategies with the brand community?

With this question the hypothesis arose:

H1: Exposure to an ingroup-negative information stimulus will lead to higher levels of oppositional loyalty toward the rival outgroup than exposure to an outgroup-negative information stimulus.

According to Brewer, intergroup conflict can increase oppositional brand loyalty toward an outgroup when the ingroup is perceived to be under threat. Consequently, when the ingroup is the target of negative information, individuals may reinforce defensive strategies towards the ingroup and strongly oppose the rival outgroup. However, this effect might well be the opposite, in case considering a possible extension of Hornsey's ingroup sensitive model (Hornsey & Imani, 2004).

H2: In the ingroup condition, individuals with stronger identification with the brand community will exhibit higher levels of oppositional loyalty toward the rival brand.

The stronger an individual's identification with a brand, the closer the brand is incorporated into their sense of identity. Consequently, when the ingroup brand is attacked or negatively portrayed, highly identified individuals may perceive the attack as more personally relevant and, therefore, display stronger opposition toward the rival brand, consistent to a defensive ingroup identity strategy. Again, the opposite effect might emerge, in case considering a possible extension of Hornsey's ingroup sensitive model (Hornsey & Imani, 2004).The content of negative information refers to a brand that violates DEI values. Thus, political ideology may affect the way individuals perceive the conflict and attribute responsibility for the misbehavior. Individuals with a more left-leaning political view may be more likely to attribute responsibility to institutional entities, such as the government or other decision-making institutions, rather than to individual actors (such as the workers). Furthermore, attributing responsibility to an institution associated with an opposing political ideology may help individuals maintain consistency between their political identity and their interpretation of the conflict, thereby protecting their sense of identity. Thus, we propose to test the following hypotheses (H3 and H4):

H3: Individuals with a more left-leaning political orientation will be more likely to attribute responsibility for the layoffs to institutional actors, particularly the company, the state, and the CEO.

H4: The more left-leaning political orientation participants adopt, the lower levels of agreement with the layoffs.[

Considering that the layoffs are presented as being initiated by a conservative right-wing government, individuals who do not identify with this ideology may be more opposed to the decision, leading individuals with a more left-leaning political orientation to report lower levels of agreement with the layoffs.

Method

Sample

At the end of the data collection period, 204 responses to the questionnaire were recorded. After excluding participants who did not complete the questionnaire, the final sample consisted of 100 valid responses.

Regarding age, participants ranged from 18 to 75 years old (M = 31.57, SD = 13.15), indicating that the sample was predominantly composed of young adults. Regarding gender, most participants identified as female (n = 71, 71%), followed by male participants (n = 26, 26%) and non-binary participants (n = 3, 3%). Regarding nationality, the sample was predominantly composed of Portuguese participants (n = 94, 94%), with Brazilian participants (n = 5, 5%) and one participant of another, unspecified nationality (n = 1, 1%). Regarding educational level, most participants had completed higher education (n = 60, 60%). This was followed by participants who had completed secondary education (n = 34, 34%), the third cycle of basic education (n = 5, 5%),

and the first and second cycles of basic education (n = 1, 1%), respectively, suggesting an overall high level of education within the sample.

Finally, regarding political positioning, participants identifying with the political left (n = 39, 39%) and center-left (n = 19, 19%) were the most represented. These were followed by participants identifying with the center-right (n = 12, 12%), center (n = 10, 10%), and right (n = 8, 8%). Additionally, 11% of participants (n = 11) indicated that they did not know or preferred not to answer, while one participant did not provide a response.

The sample was obtained through a convenience sampling, with the questionnaire distributed through digital platforms and public spaces.

Experimental Design

The study employed a single-factor, between-subjects experimental design with one manipulated independent variable: group with negative information. The independent variable had two levels: ingroup condition and outgroup condition.

Procedure

For the present investigation, two rival carbonated soft drink brands, namely Coca-Cola and Pepsi, were selected. Both brands are widely recognized by the public and are associated with rivalry between brands.

Experimental manipulation.

Past this selection, two experimental stimuli were created in the form of fictitious news articles. These informed participants about the existence of rumors claiming that the brands (Coca-Cola and Pepsi) had yielded to government demands and allegedly adopted discriminatory practices by laying off Latin American workers in leu of the Trump administration anti DEI policy. In the ingroup condition, participants were exposed to a scenario in which their preferred brand was presented as responsible for the dismissal of workers of Latin American nationality. In the

outgroup conditions, participants were exposed to an equivalent scenario in which the rival brand was presented as responsible for the dismissals. Thus, the experimental manipulation consisted of varying whether the brand associated with the negative event corresponded to the participant's preferred brand (ingroup) or to the rival brand (outgroup).

The stimuli were presented randomly to participants, and they subsequently answered the questions corresponding to the conditions to which they had been assigned.

Before the presentation of the stimuli, inclusion criteria for participation in the study were also established, namely being of legal age and providing informed consent. In addition to this, sociodemographic data were collected, including gender, political affiliation, and degree of agreement with the measures described in the stimulus, with the aim of characterizing the sample and exploring possible variables that could influence the results.

At the end of the questionnaire, a debriefing was presented to safeguard the integrity of the brands used and ensure the well-being of the participants, clarifying the fictitious nature of the stimuli presented.

The instrument was distributed through several digital platforms, including Reddit, WhatsApp, Facebook, and email, as well as through posters displayed in public spaces. Data collection took place over approximately four months. The responses were subsequently processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27).

Measures[1]

After reading the experimental manipulation, participants answered the dependent measures.

[1] Due to an error in the questionnaire design, the brand identification variable could not be used in the analysis.

Brand community identification

Brand community identification was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from Kuo and Hou (2017). The answers were given on a Likert scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with additional option to indicate if they preferred not to answer or did not know. Items were then averaged to compute a final score with higher scores indicating a higher identification with the brand community. The principal component analysis revealed a single factor that explained 72.97% of the total variance. The internal consistency analysis demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha of .924.

Brand commitment

Brand commitment was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from Kuo and Hou (2017). The answers were given on a Likert scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with additional options to indicate if they preferred not to answer or did not know. Items were then averaged to compute a final score with higher scores indicating a higher Brand commitment. The principal component analysis revealed a single factor, explaining 75.46% of the total variance. The Cronbach's alpha obtained was .837, indicating good internal consistency.

Oppositional brand commitment

Oppositional brand commitment was measured using a 2-item scale developed for the present study. The answers were given on a Likert scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with additional options to indicate if they preferred not to answer or did not know. Items were then averaged to compute a final score with higher scores indicating a higher oppositional Brand commitment. The PCA identified a single factor explaining 89.52% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha obtained was .880, indicating high internal consistency.

Oppositional brand loyalty

The oppositional brand loyalty was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from Kuo and Hou (2017). The answers were given on a Likert scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with additional options to indicate if they preferred not to answer or did not know. Items were then averaged to compute a final score with higher scores indicating a higher oppositional brand loyalty. The PCA revealed a single factor responsible for explaining 70.15% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha was .906, indicating internal consistency

Agreement with the workers' dismissals

Agreement with the dismissals was measured using a 3-item scale developed for the present study. The answers were given on a Likert scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with additional options to indicate if they preferred not to answer or did not know. Items were then averaged to compute a final score with higher scores indicating a higher agreement with the dismissals. The PCA also presented a single factor, explaining 66.67% of the total variance. The Cronbach's alpha obtained was .749, a value considered acceptable in the literature for exploratory research purposes. This is a control measure, aimed at assessing if the negative information about the brand was perceived as negative by all participants.

Results

H1: Exposure to an ingroup-negative information stimulus will lead to higher levels of oppositional loyalty toward the rival outgroup than exposure to an outgroup-negative information stimulus.

To test this hypothesis, independent-samples *t* tests were conducted to examine differences between the ingroup and outgroup conditions across the dependent variables. The results revealed statistically significant differences between conditions for oppositional loyalty, $t(94) = 2.289$, $p = .024$; commitment to the opposing brand, $t(93) = -8.248$, $p < .001$.

Regarding oppositional loyalty, participants in the ingroup condition reported higher levels (M = 2.05, SD = 1.09) than participants in the outgroup condition (M = 1.60, SD = .84). Furthermore, results shows that participants of the outgroup condition reported higher levels of commitment with the oppositional brand (M = 2.95, SD = 1.35) than members of the ingroup condition (M = 1.24, SD = .48).

These results suggest that when participants' preferred brand was the target of the negative information stimulus, they expressed stronger opposition toward the rival brand than when the rival brand was the target. This finding is consistent with H1 and with the idea that the negative information of the ingroup may increase the salience of the distinction between the preferred and rival brands, leading to stronger oppositional responses toward the outgroup, a defensive strategy of the ingroup identity facing a threat.

H2: In the ingroup condition, individuals with stronger identification with the brand community will exhibit higher levels of oppositional loyalty toward the rival brand.

To test this hypothesis, Pearson's moment-product correlations were conducted between identification with the brand community and oppositional loyalty separately by the ingroup and outgroup conditions.

In the ingroup condition, a positive significant correlation was found between identification with the brand community and oppositional loyalty, $r(46) = .348$, $p = .015$. Thus, participants who reported stronger identification with the brand community also tended to report higher levels of oppositional loyalty toward the rival brand.

In the outgroup condition, no statistically significant correlation was observed between identification with the brand community and oppositional loyalty. Therefore, the relationship predicted by H2 was confirmed.

H3: Individuals with a more left-leaning political orientation will be more likely to attribute responsibility for the layoffs to institutional actors, particularly the company, the state, and the CEO.

To examine this hypothesis, Pearson's moment-product correlations were conducted between political alignment and responsibility attributed to the company, the state, and the CEO, by the ingroup and outgroup conditions.

In the ingroup condition, political alignment was positively correlated with responsibility attributed to the CEO, $r(44) = .410$, $p = .006$. Thus, participants positioned further to the left on the political spectrum tended to attribute greater responsibility for the layoffs to the CEO.

In the outgroup condition, political alignment was positively correlated with responsibility attributed to the state, $r(42) = .367$, $p = .023$, and responsibility attributed to the CEO, $r(42) = .377$, $p = .021$. Thus, participants positioned further to the left politically tended to attribute greater responsibility for the layoffs to both the state and the CEO.

The results therefore provide partial support for H3. The expected relationship between political alignment and responsibility attributed to institutional actors was observed, although the specific actors involved differed between conditions.

Furthermore, moderate-to-strong positive correlations were found between responsibility attributed to the different institutional actors. In the ingroup condition, responsibility attributed to the company was positively correlated with responsibility attributed to the state, $r(45) = .413$, $p = .004$, and with responsibility attributed to the CEO, $r(44) = .559$, $p < .001$. In the outgroup condition, responsibility attributed to the company was positively correlated with responsibility attributed to the state, $r(43) = .476$, $p < .001$, and with responsibility attributed to the CEO, $r(43) = .659$, $p < .001$. Responsibility attributed to the state was also positively correlated with

responsibility attributed to the CEO, $r(42) = .714$, $p < .001$. These findings indicate that participants who attributed greater responsibility to one institutional actor also tended to attribute greater responsibility to other institutional actors.

Additionally, in the ingroup condition, responsibility attributed to the company was negatively correlated with responsibility attributed to the dismissed workers, $r(44) = -.421$, $p = .004$. Similarly, responsibility attributed to the state was negatively correlated with responsibility attributed to the dismissed workers, $r(44) = -.344$, $p = .019$. Thus, participants who attributed greater responsibility to institutional actors tended to attribute less responsibility to the dismissed workers.

H4: The more left-leaning political orientation participants adopt, the lower levels of agreement with the layoffs.

To test this hypothesis, Pearson's moment-product correlation analyses were conducted between political alignment and agreement with the layoffs by the ingroup and outgroup conditions.

In the ingroup condition, political alignment was negatively correlated with agreement with the layoffs, $r(41) = -.428$, $p = .006$. Thus, the more participants positioned in the left on the political spectrum the lower levels of agreement with the layoffs.

In the outgroup conditions, a negative correlation was also observed between political alignment and agreement with the layoffs, $r(43) = -.321$, $p = .050$, although this association was weaker.

Additionally, in the outgroup condition, political alignment was negatively correlated with responsibility attributed to the dismissed workers, $r(43) = -.305$, $p = .041$, indicating that the more

participants positioned to the left political tendency, the less they attributed responsibility to the dismissed workers.

Overall, these findings are consistent with H4, as left-leaning political orientation is negatively associated with agreement with the layoffs across both experimental conditions.

Discussion

One of the main findings of this study was therefore the positive association between identification with the brand community and oppositional loyalty when the ingroup was the target of negative information. This result suggests that participants with a stronger psychological and social connection to their preferred brand community tended to express stronger oppositional attitudes toward the competing brand when their preferred brand was negatively portrayed.

This finding is consistent with the perspectives proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Brewer (1999), according to which group identification strengthens processes of social differentiation between groups, in this case promoting ingroup favoritism toward one's preferred brand and more negative attitudes toward the rival brand group.

The identification of positive correlations between these variables and brand commitment further suggests the idea of a strong psychological connection between individuals and their preferred brand.

All these processes are quite interesting given the low levels of ingroup identification that were observed regarding Coca-Cola and Pepsi brands. Indeed, the emergence of these processes even with such low identification levels corroborate the assumptions of social identity theory regarding not only the motivational process to protect ingroup identity facing a threat, but also to strategically chose to downgrade the outgroup as a part of such strategy, especially in a context of

ingroup weaken public image. Outgroup hate, in Brewer terms, may also emerge in such situations, besides intergroup conflict situations, as a means to protect ingroup positive identity.

Another noteworthy finding was the positive correlation between responsibility attributed to the company, the state, and the CEO. This suggests that participants perceived the layoffs as a structural phenomenon, attributing responsibility to public and organizational institutions rather than primarily to the workers themselves.

Supporting this interpretation, negative correlations were observed between the responsibility attributed to institutional actors and the responsibility attributed to the dismissed workers in the ingroup condition. Thus, greater attribution of responsibility to institutional entities was associated with lower attribution of responsibility to the workers.

The attribution of responsibility to institutional actors was also associated with political alignment. Participants who identified more strongly with a left-wing political position tended to attribute greater responsibility for the layoffs to the CEO, the state, and other institutional entities. Moreover, the more participants were positioned toward the political left, the less likely they were to agree with the layoffs.

These findings suggest that individuals with stronger left-wing political orientations may interpret layoffs from a more structural and critical perspective, emphasizing organizational hierarchies and institutional responsibility. In contrast, participants who were less aligned with the political left appeared more likely to adopt a more favorable perspective toward the legitimacy of corporate decisions and more accepting of the layoffs.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reinforce the relevance of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner (1986) for understanding brand communities, showing that consumers' identification with

their preferred brand can shape how they evaluate and respond to negative events involving the brand or its competitors.

The results also suggest that identity-related and ideological factors play role in how consumers interpret events involving brands, mimicking behavioral patterns characteristic of naturally occurring social groups.

Although the findings were, overall, consistent with the theoretical framework presented, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. These include the small sample size and the bias that comes with a convenience sample. Additionally, there were some limitations associated with the data collection instrument itself, particularly regarding the operationalization of the brand identification variable.

In this regard, future research should seek to employ larger samples, thereby increasing the robustness and generalizability of the findings. It would also be valuable to review and refine the measurement instruments used, particularly the measure of brand identification, as well as to employ methodological designs that allow for the establishment of causal relationships between the variables under investigation.

Furthermore, the use of experimental stimuli with greater emotional relevance may contribute to a stronger activation of the identification mechanisms associated with brand communities, potentially resulting in more pronounced effects. Including open-ended questions could also provide relevant qualitative information regarding the clarity, length, and structure of the questionnaire, allowing the instrument to be further refined in future research.

Another relevant avenue for future research would be to replicate the present study in cultural contexts where brand identification and participation in brand communities are more pronounced, such as the United States. The low level of identification observed in the present

sample may be related to a lower propensity for developing strong identification with brands within the Portuguese context and may therefore have influenced the results obtained. In this context, it would also be relevant to include additional sociodemographic variables, such as race, particularly given the historical association between the Pepsi brand and the African American community. This would make it possible to control potential sources of bias and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena observed (Davis, 2019; Estes, 2013).

In summary, the findings are consistent with the expectations formulated based on the existing literature and contribute to reinforcing the applicability of Social Identity Theory to the study of brand communities and the ways in which these communities influence the perception and evaluation of corporate crises. Although the limitations identified call for caution when interpreting the findings, the present study contributes to a better understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying consumer–brand relationships, while also providing a basis for future research aimed at further developing and consolidating this area of study.

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Appendix

Table A1

Descriptive statistics of the sample's sociodemographic characteristics and political alignment.

Descriptive Statistics

	n	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
Por favor, indique a sua idade	100	18.00	75.00	31.5700	13.15199
Por favor, indique o género com que se identifica	100	1	3	1.77	.489
Por favor, indique a sua nacionalidade	100	1	3	1.07	.293
Qual o seu nível de instrução (completo) até ao momento?	100	1	5	1.48	.689
Como se classificaria em termos de alinhamento político?	99	1	7	4.14	1.648
Valid N (listwise)	99				

Table A2

Frequencies and percentages of participant gender

Por favor, indique o género com que se identifica

	n	%
Masculino	26	26.0%
Feminino	71	71.0%
Não binário	3	3.0%

Table A3

Frequencies and percentages of participants' nationalities

Por favor, indique a sua nacionalidade

	n	%
Portuguesa	94	94.0%
Brasileira	5	5.0%
Outro	1	1.0%

Table A4

Frequencies and percentages of participants' education level

Qual o seu nível de instrução (completo) até ao momento?

	n	%
Médio/Superior–Universitário/Bacharelato	60	60.0 %
Secundário–11/12ºano / Antigo 7ºano (completo)	34	34.0 %
3º Ciclo–9ºano / Antigo 5ºano (completo)	5	5.0 %
1º Ciclo–Instrução Primária Completa	1	1.0 %

Table A5

Frequencies and percentages of participants' political alignment

Como se classificaria em termos de alinhamento político?

		n	%
Direita		8	8.0%
Centro-Direita		12	12.0%
Centro		10	10.0%
Centro esquerda		19	19.0%
Esquerda		39	39.0%
Não sei/Prefiro não responder		11	11.0%
Missing	Outro	1	1.0%

Table A6

Principal component analysis for the brand community identification variable

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.378	72.969	72.969	4.378	72.969	72.969
2	.558	9.303	82.272			
3	.391	6.513	88.785			
4	.318	5.295	94.080			
5	.217	3.614	97.694			
6	.138	2.306	100.000			

Table A7

Reliability analysis for the brand community identification variable

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.924	6

Table A8

Principal component analysis for the brand commitment variable

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.264	75.455	75.455	2.264	75.455	75.455
2	.495	16.493	91.948			
3	.242	8.052	100.000			

Table A9

Reliability analysis for the brand commitment variable

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.837	3

Table A10

Principal component analysis for the oppositional brand commitment variable

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.790	89.519	89.519	1.790	89.519	89.519
2	.210	10.481	100.000			

Table A11

Reliability analysis for the oppositional brand commitment variable

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.880	2

Table A12

Principal component analysis for the oppositional loyalty variable

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.209	70.147	70.147	4.209	70.147	70.147
2	.718	11.962	82.109			
3	.414	6.894	89.004			
4	.306	5.096	94.100			
5	.254	4.230	98.330			
6	.100	1.670	100.000			

Table A13

Reliability analysis for the oppositional loyalty variable

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.906	6

Table A14

Principal component analysis for the variable "agreement with layoffs

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.000	66.673	66.673	2.000	66.673	66.673
2	.622	20.734	87.407			
3	.378	12.593	100.000			

Table A15

Reliability analysis for the variable "agreement with the layoffs"

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.749	3

Table A16

Independent sample t-test for the dependent variables

	condition				
	ingroup		outgroup		
Dependent Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p*
Brand Community Identification	1.6465	.96398	1.5101	.86890	.468
Oppositional Loyalty	2.0500	1.08543	1.5972	.83693	.024*
Commitment to the Opposing Brand	1.2396	.48366	2.9468	1.34824	< .001*
Brand Commitment	2.4097	1.20134	1.3188	.70957	< .001*
Agreement with the Layoffs	1.1318	.44922	1.3050	.72175	.180
Causal Attribution: Company	4.17	1.291	4.24	1.177	.789
Causal Attribution: State	3.87	1.345	3.67	1.261	.452
Causal Attribution: Company CEO	4.26	1.084	4.04	1.296	.389
Causal Attribution: Laid-Off Workers	1.24	.773	1.26	.801	.921
Political Alignment	3.78	1.330	3.82	1.467	.889

Table A17

Correlations between the variables for the ingroup and outgroup conditions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1: Brand Community Identification	-	.219	.382*	.705*	.091	-.062	.132	-.009	.046	-.060
2: Oppositional Loyalty	.348*	-	.251	.129	.066	.026	-.022	.065	-.180	.033
3: Commitment to the Opposing Brand	.287*	.067	-	.290	.183	.067	.267	.111	.107	-.005
4: Brand Commitment	.715*	.367*	.456*	-	-.173	.029	.307*	.099	.022	.098
5: Agreement with the Layoffs	-.001	-.139	-.145	-.130	-	.117	-.118	-.135	.453*	-.321*
6: Causal Attribution: Company	.114	.057	.143	.089	-.002	-	.476*	.659*	-.020	.238
7: Causal Attribution: State	.088	-.158	.246	.053	-.377*	.413*	-	.714*	.172	.367*
8: Causal Attribution: Company CEO	.100	.296*	.193	.193	-.119	.559*	.156	-	.075	.377*
9: Causal Attribution: Laid-Off Workers	.053	-.038	.048	.296*	.035	-.481*	-.352*	-.059	-	-.353*
10: Political Alignment	.074	-.043	.119	.211	-.428*	.280	.281	.410*	-.021	-

Note: The upper diagonal is referent to outgroup correlations, whereas the inferior diagonal is referent to ingroup correlations

The symbol (*) represents $p < .05$