

Investigating The Determinants Of Brand Advocacy In The Tourism Sector, Customer Irrational Beliefs As A Moderator

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Abstract

Brand advocacy is a customer behavior desired by the marketer. Researchers are keenly pursuing to determine its antecedent. Hence, this study aims to investigate the antecedents of brand advocacy: brand associations and brand beliefs. The study draws on the idea of attitude-behavior consistency and explores if the brand association can have a transmittal impact on brand advocacy via brand beliefs. The study also explores the moderating impact of customers' irrational beliefs. The context of the study is the tourism sector. The study considered a useful sample of 402 tourists and employed PLS-SEM for the data analysis. Results have revealed the positive impact of association and beliefs on brand advocacy. Whereas a weakening moderating impact of customers' irrational beliefs was found. The study contributed to the literature by assessing the new antecedents of brand advocacy which were yet to be considered. The study also contributed to the literature by employing customers' irrational beliefs as a moderator for the first time. The research has future recommendations for the researchers to increase the generalizability of the research and to contribute to the literature on studied constructs. The research has implications for managers. It provides managers with guidelines on what to do and avoid to develop strong destinations.

Keywords: Brand Advocacy, Brand Association, Brand Beliefs, Customer Irrational Beliefs, Tourism

Introduction

Tourism has seen immense growth in the last two decades and is one of the key sectors adding to the global economy (Srivastava et al., 2022). According to the 2022 World Travel and Tourism Council report, the tourism sector has contributed 6.1% to the global gross domestic product (GDP) (WTTC, 2022). Given the economic importance of the sector, tourism and travel is getting competitive and it has become very challenging to attract global and domestic tourists due to the number of options available (Saini & Arasanmi, 2021). Places are multi-dimensional and converting them into a brand is an intricate job (Tosun et al., 2021). Hence, many consumer-

brand relationships are considered in tourism research (Farhat & Chaney, 2021). To win over the competition, destination marketers are working on developing marketing and branding strategies for the places (Jain et al., 2022). The utmost vision of destination managers is to create an emotional bond of tourists with the place so that they intend to revisit, talk about the place (Srivastava et al., 2022) and give positive reviews about the place. Reviews commonly occur in the tourism sector (Martin-Fuentes et al., 2018) that highlight the importance of brand advocacy.

Brand advocacy is one consumer-brand relation that is a dream of managers to achieve as advocacy is the most authentic form of

communication and is generated by consumers rather (Wilk et al., 2021). According to Choi et al. (2021), more than 90% of customers trust the recommendations of others. Destinations require advocates to attract more tourists hence brand advocacy can play a major role in the longevity of the tourism business (Saini & Arasanmi, 2021).

Brand advocacy is an important brand behavior whereas there are gaps in the literature as to what determines brand advocacy, Bhati and Verma (2020) have emphasized the investigation of antecedents of brand advocacy. Similarly, researchers (Ali et al., 2023; Saini & Arasanmi, 2021) are keen to investigate brand advocacy in the context of a place or destination and have mentioned the need for research on further determinants of brand advocacy. The extant research has considered the impact of brand experience and brand engagement (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020) trust (Tassawa & Banjongprasert, 2019) competitiveness and satisfaction (Saini & Arasanmi, 2021) ethnocentrism and brand image (Lever et al., 2022), and brand love (Ali et al., 2023) on advocacy. To fill the gaps in the existing literature on the call of researchers to investigate more drivers of brand advocacy, the current research will consider brand associations and brand beliefs as determinants of brand advocacy and will consider customers' irrational beliefs as a moderator. The study will draw on the attitude-behavior consistency theory which states that positive attitudes will endorse positive behaviors whereas negative attitudes will bring about negative behavior. Considering these determinants and moderator are important for research and practice in multiple ways.

Firstly, brand associations are significant for both marketers and consumers. It allows marketers to position the brand thoughtfully (Gordon et al., 2016) and gain competitive edge over competition (Rai & Nayak, 2019). Success of a brand is often dependent on positive brand

associations (Zelenskaya & Elkanova, 2021). Brand association helps consumers in differentiating a brand from the competitors and aid in decision-making process (Karagiorgos et al., 2023). Brand associations provide value to the customer (Azzari & Pelissari, 2021) and impact their behaviors (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2017). Accordingly, this study considers if brand associations can impact brand advocacy.

Secondly, brand beliefs are cognitive and influential, they are formed based on perceptions fueled with information about the brand (Vogt & Andereck, 2003). Beliefs can range from positive to negative and rational to irrational (Rizvi & Oney, 2018). Ultimately, brand beliefs impact the intentions and behaviors of the customers (Sukhu et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study builds on the notion of beliefs impacting behavior and will investigate the impact of brand beliefs on brand advocacy and will also explore the if brand association can transmit its impact on brand advocacy using brand beliefs. As both brand beliefs and brand associations are considered in the category of brand attitudes. The paper draws on the idea of attitude-behavior consistency theory. The attitude-behavior consistency has provided the base of many theories and models. This paper draws on the Motivation and Opportunity Determinants (MODE) model of attitude-behavior by Fazio (1990). The model conveys that strong attitudes determine the behaviors where the opportunity exists that behavior can go in opposite direction. The MODE can use the spontaneous process or the deliberative process (Ellithorpe, 2020).

Third, as mentioned the beliefs can be rational or irrational, the research has shown the impact of positive beliefs positively on behavior and vice versa. However, there are less evidence of research on negative beliefs and rarely on customer's irrational beliefs (Seger-Guttmann, 2019). According to Seger-Guttmann (2019), it is important to consider customer irrational beliefs

in future studies on communicative variables. As established places are multidimensional (Pike, 2005) and contain multiple activities where tourists interact with not only the scenic locations but also with the residents and service providers (Rop, 2022) and can behave differently. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the moderating effect of customer irrational beliefs

on brand advocacy. Figure 1 depicts the research framework

The next section will discuss the literature and hypothesis followed by methodology and results. The research also includes the discussion and conclusion.

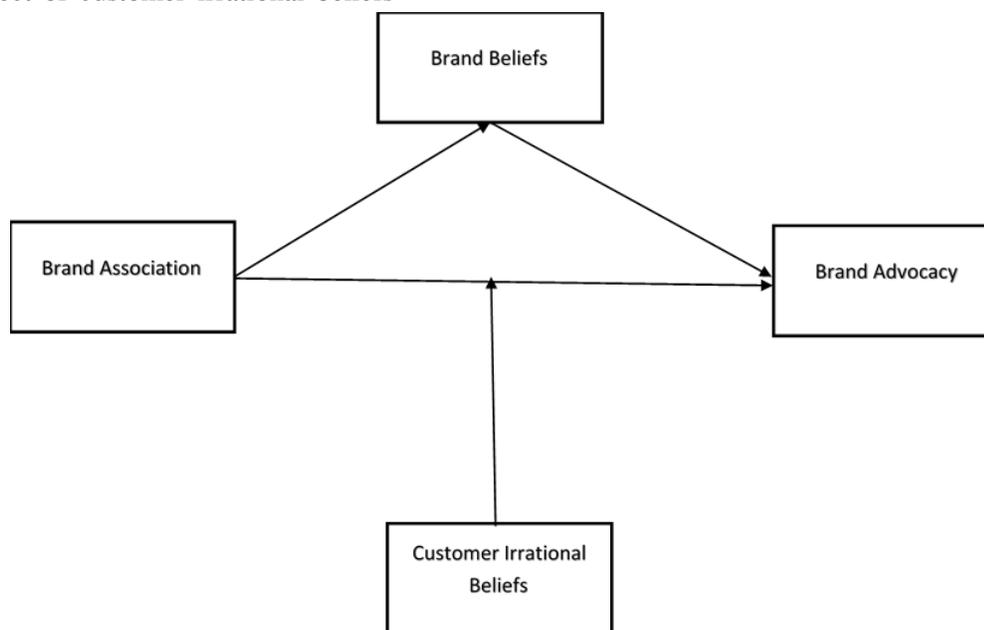


Figure 1: The research framework

Literature review and hypotheses building

Brand Associations

Brand associations (BA) are considered as the building block of brand image in consumers' minds (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) has classically defined brand associations as any idea or information related to a brand that is stored in the memory of consumers, either negative or positive (Goyal, 2020). The current research considers brand association as any positive association of the place in the mind of the tourist. Supphellen (2000) argued that most of brand associations usually sit unconsciously in the head and hence require deep understanding. The majority of associations are non-verbal i.e. visual or sensory (Goyal, 2020; Supphellen, 2000).

Hence, the need to understand and identify the impact of brand associations exists in researchers (Thellefsen & Sørensen, 2015).

Brand Beliefs

Brand beliefs (BB) are defined as the perception of brand performance based on brand interactions and brand knowledge (Lutz, 1975). These perceptions or beliefs are created in the mind of consumers when they interact with the brand at any level (Keller, 1993). Also, these interactions can range from direct interaction and usage of the brand or getting to know about the brand through any kind of promotional activity by the brand (Rizvi & Oney, 2018). Beliefs can be positive and desirable or negative and undesirable, and can impact the brand choices (Winchester et al.,

2008). This research operationalized brand beliefs as positive perceptions about the place in tourist's mind.

Brand Advocacy

Customers who are highly inspired by a brand, defend it and recommend it actively to others are known as advocates of the brand (Fuggetta, 2012) and the behavior of advocating the brand is known as brand advocacy (Ahmadi & Ataei, 2022). Brand advocates tend to help increase the reach of the brand organically (Bhati & Verma, 2020). The researchers have argued that the customers who are advocating the brand not only spread positive word of mouth but also shun any negative word of mouth being spread against the brand (Bhati & Verma, 2020). Thus, for this study brand advocacy (BA_d) is operationalized as the behavior of tourists to recommend the place, defend the place and shirk any negative communication about the place.

Customer Irrational beliefs

The literature on customer irrational beliefs (CIB) is still in the infancy stage. Seger-Guttman (2019) has emphasized the need of understanding and consider customers' irrational beliefs due to their contribution in impacting the behavior of customers towards service providers across different service industries. Seger-Guttman (2019) developed a scale for customer's irrational beliefs by considering four dimensions namely subjective favoritism, absolute fairness, reasoning supremacy, and power games. Seger-Guttman (2019) maintained that most interactions of customers with service providers either negative or positive are thoroughly influenced by their own perceptions which can be irrational often. For this study, the interaction of tourists with any kind of service providers based on their perceptive ideas of namely subjective favoritism, absolute fairness, reasoning supremacy, and power games at their place of

visitation will be considered as customer's irrational beliefs.

Brand Association and brand beliefs

Khamitov et al. (2019) argued that most brand relations have dependencies on each other. Most of the brand-consumer relationships revolve around different brand attributes impacting each other and most of them predicting behavior (Albert & Thomson, 2018). Brand association and brand beliefs are both considered as important predictors of other behaviors. However, research is scarce on their relationship. Therefore, this research proposes to investigate if place based associations can impact the beliefs. Thus,

H1: Brand associations positively impact brand beliefs

Brand Association and brand advocacy

Brand associations are powerful enough to elicit a positive response from consumers (Tian et al., 2022). Associations can be used to construct a certain image of self which allows the customers to think and behave a certain way (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Brand association in extant literature has been seen predicting brand behaviors either by being part of brand equity or by using different proxies. Kemp et al. (2012) argued the relationship between association and advocacy through use of other brand factors as associations. Based on the aforementioned arguments and the use of MODE model of attitude behavior consistency, it can be hypothesized that brand association of a place can impact its brand advocacy. The research proposes that

H2: Brand association positively impact brand advocacy

Brand Beliefs and brand advocacy

Brand beliefs have predictive capacity to predict behavior (Sukhu et al., 2019). The relationship between brand beliefs and brand advocacy is

scant in the literature. Ballantyne et al. (2006) controlled beliefs while studying advocacy can hint on the existence of impact of beliefs on advocacy. In their meta-analytic study on advocacy Bhati and Verma (2020) emphasized on the importance of identifying new determinants of brand advocacy. Given the literature based arguments and drawing on MODE model, the study intends to examine the impact of brand beliefs on brand advocacy. Therefore, it is proposed that

H3: Brand beliefs positively impacts brand association

Brand Association, brand beliefs and brand advocacy

Tian et al. (2022) has stated the facilitation power of brand associations and beliefs in transferring their impact on behaviors. Therefore, this study considers brand beliefs as a mediator which may transmit the impact of brand association on brand advocacy. The study draws on MODE model (Fazio, 1990) and maintains that brand associations and brand beliefs as attitudes will align to influence the behavior i.e. brand advocacy. Based on these arguments, the study proposes that

H4: Brand beliefs mediate the relationship between brand association and brand advocacy

Customer Irrational Beliefs as moderator

As Seger-Guttmann (2019) proposed to find the effects of the scale of customer irrational beliefs in multiple service settings and in a destination where situation is different than their go to stores customers may behave totally different. The author also proposed to check if the irrational beliefs of customers can predict the customer related outcomes and identify different relationships, this study will use the CIB as a moderator and see if it can strengthen or weakens the relationships of different brand aspects. This

study will use place as the context and will investigate the moderating effects of customer irrational beliefs. Thus, it is proposed that

H5: Customer Irrational Beliefs moderate the relationship between Brand Associations and Brand Advocacy and weakens the link

Methodology and methods

The research employed quantitative technique and the unit of data analysis was individual tourists who had traveled at least once. A tourist is someone who spent time away from the home environment for leisure or work (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2018). The data was collected through online Google forms. Tourist operators and travel firms were approached to identify the tourists to provide data. Once the respondents were willing to participate in the research, the Google link was provided to them. The form had 3 sections, the first section introduced them with the objective of the study, section two included the scales of constructs and the final and third section included their demographic information. The instrument of brand advocacy with 12 items was adapted from Sweeney et al. (2020). The scales of brand association and brand beliefs were adapted from Foroudi (2019), both scales had 4 items each respectively. The scale for moderator customer irrational beliefs was adapted from Seger-Guttmann (2019) that consisted of 19 items. The adaption of the scale was done to fit the questionnaire with the objectives of the study by replacing the word “brand” by “this place”. The reason for replacement is the use of place as a brand and to avoid any confusions. To determine the sample size, G*Power calculator was used. The maximum arrows pointing towards a construct were 3 and the power was set at 0.90 and 0.05 was the effect size. 288 was the number of required sample however 411 responses were collected and 9 were discarded. The final data of

402 tourists was analyzed using PLS-SEM software.

Table 1 presents the respondent profile. 55% of respondents were less than 25 years of age whereas 33% were between ages 26-35.

Results

Respondent profile

Table 1: Respondent Profile

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	240	60
Female	162	40
Education		
Bachelors	221	55
Post Grad	57	14
PhD	21	5
Masters	103	26
Age in years		
18-25	220	55
26-35	133	33
35-45	41	10
45 and above	8	2
Type of tourism		
Cultural	58	14
Adventure	256	64
Religious	36	9
Others	52	13

Common Method Bias

Podsakoff et al. (2012) stated that the existence of common method bias can impact the validity of the survey. To identify if any common method bias exists, the Variance Inflation Factor(VIF) method suggested by Kock (2015) was

employed. According to the Kock (2015), if the VIF value of any variable is more than 3.3, the issue of collinearity exists and there is a common method bias. However, Table 2 shows that all the values of the current study are under 3.3 hence there is no common method bias and the survey is valid.

Table 2: Common Method Bias

	BA	Bad	BB	CIB
BA		2.629	1.000	
BAd				
BB		2.704		
CIB		1.226		

Measurement Model

To evaluate the reliability and validity, measurement model was assessed. To analyze the reliability PLS algorithm was run. 5 items with outer loadings less than the acceptable level of 0.70 were deleted. Out of these deleted items; BA1 was from construct brand association, BB1 was from brand belief, while three items BAd9, BAd11, and BAd 12 were from the construct

brand advocacy. BA4 and BB4 were also excluded later due to their high cross loadings. After the elimination of the items, the model was reassessed.

Table 3 presents the values of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability to establish the reliability of the scale. The values were well above the acceptable value range of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 3: Reliability and Validity

Construct	Items	OL	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Brand Associations	BA2	0.856	0.764	0.854	0.608
	BA3	0.89			
Brand Beliefs	BB2	0.901	0.838	0.894	0.68
	BB3	0.900			
Brand Advocacy	BAd1	0.787	0.932	0.941	0.575
	BAd2	0.799			
	BAd3	0.775			
	BAd4	0.827			
	BAd5	0.810			
	BAd6	0.756			
	BAd7	0.835			
	BAd8	0.812			
	BAd10	0.750			
	Customer Irrational Beliefs				
Subjective Favoritism	sf1	0.773			
	sf2	0.834			
	sf3	0.793			
	sf4	0.854			
	sf5	0.844			
	sf6	0.799			
Absolute Fairness	af1	0.821			
	af2	0.871			
	af3	0.819			
	af4	0.858			
	af5	0.813			
Reasoning Supremacy	rs1	0.857			
	rs2	0.869			
	rs3	0.869			
	rs4	0.854			

Power Game	pg1	0.784
	pg2	0.888
	pg3	0.838
	pg4	0.785

To establish convergent validity, the values of average variance extracted (AVE) and Outer loadings (OL) were assessed. The acceptable range of AVE is above 0.50 and Outer Loadings is 0.70. Table 3 shows the values above the acceptable range, which establishes the convergent (Hair et al., 2019).

Discriminant Validity

Henseler et al. (2015) has proposed the Hetrotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio criterion to

assess the discriminant validity. The HTMT criterion is more rigorous than the other methods and is efficient in considering the discriminant validity (Muhammad & Sarwar, 2021). According to the criterion, the values of the variables should be under 0.90. Table 4 shows the HTMT ratio values and all the values are as per the recommendation i.e. less than 0.90. As the measurement model was satisfactory, next, the structural model was assessed.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity

	B Ad	BA	BB	CIB
B Ad				
BA	0.840			
BB	0.808	0.884		
CIB	0.498	0.412	0.369	

Structural Model

For the structural model (depicted in figure 2), coefficient of determination R², effect sizes f², out sample prediction (Q² predict), and t values were assessed. The 5000 subsamples bootstrapping procedure was employed to assess the t-values. The model exhibited a good explanatory power as the value of the R² for the dependent value was

above 0.557. Similarly, the Table 5 shows above 0.5 values of Q² predict as well, showing good predicting power of the model. Table 5 also shows the impact of brand association on beliefs (β=0.746) and advocacy (β=0.390) endorsing its positive impact. Also, the positive impact of brand beliefs on brand advocacy (β=0.460) can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5:Hypotheses Testing

Relationship	Hypotheses	β	SD	t -values	Decisions	f ²	R ²	Q ² predict
BA -> BB	H1	0.746	0.044	16.837	Accepted	1.256	0.557	0.557
BA -> B Ad	H2	0.390	0.058	6.709	Accepted	0.183	0.632	0.590
BB -> B Ad	H3	0.460	0.059	7.799	Accepted	0.255		

Note: p<0.0001

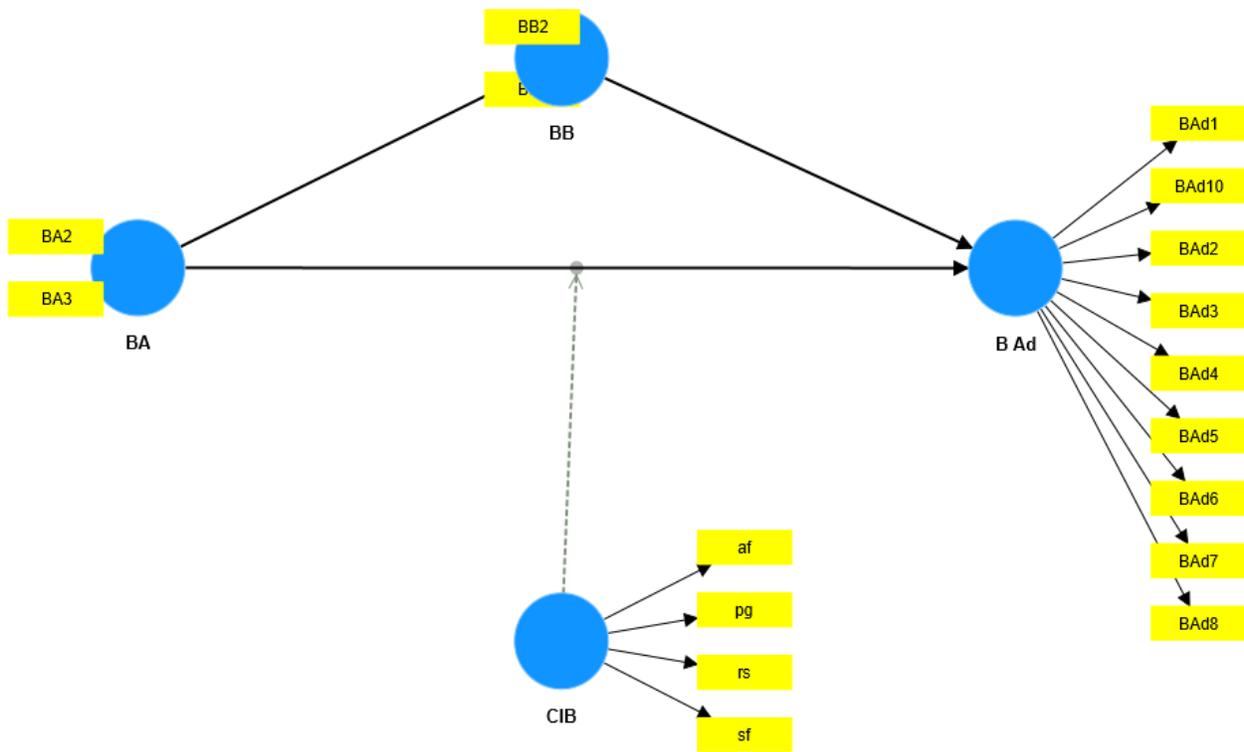


Figure 2: The structural Model

Table 6 is revealing the result of mediation analysis. The results show that brand beliefs mediate the relationship between association and advocacy. Preacher and Hayes (2008) argued that for mediation to take place, there shouldn't be any

zero between the upper and lower limit of the confidence interval. The results are aligned with the clause as there is no zero in the confidence interval (CI=0.241, 0.455) and the β is 0.343.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis

Relationship	Hypotheses	β	SD	t-values	Confidence Interval	Decision
BA-> BB -> BAd	H4	0.343	0.053	6.532	2.50% 97.50% 0.241 0.450	Accepted

Note: $p < 0.0001$

For the moderation analysis, 5000 bootstrapping method was employed. According to Henseler and Fassott (2010), for moderation to take place, interaction term needs to be significant.

According to Table 7, the interaction term is significant ($\beta = -0.057, p = 0.018$). Also, as there is no zero in confidence interval (-0.109, -0.015), moderation is confirmed (Muhammad & Sarwar,

2021). The negative sign of β of the interaction term shows that moderator weakens the

relationship. The moderation can also be seen from the slope analysis as shown in Figure 3.

Table 7: Moderation Analysis

Relationship	Hypotheses	β	SD	t-values	P	Confidence Interval		Decision
						2.50%	97.50%	
BA -> B Ad	H5	0.319	0.055	5.84	0.000	0.209	0.425	
CIB -> B Ad		0.198	0.037	5.319	0.000	0.128	0.275	
CIB x BA -> B Ad		-0.057	0.024	2.355	0.018	-0.109	-0.015	Accepted

As the slopes are not parallel, that means the moderation is taking place. The slope analysis shows that below 1SD the CIB strengthens the

relationship whereas at 1SD above the mean, CIB weakens the relationship.

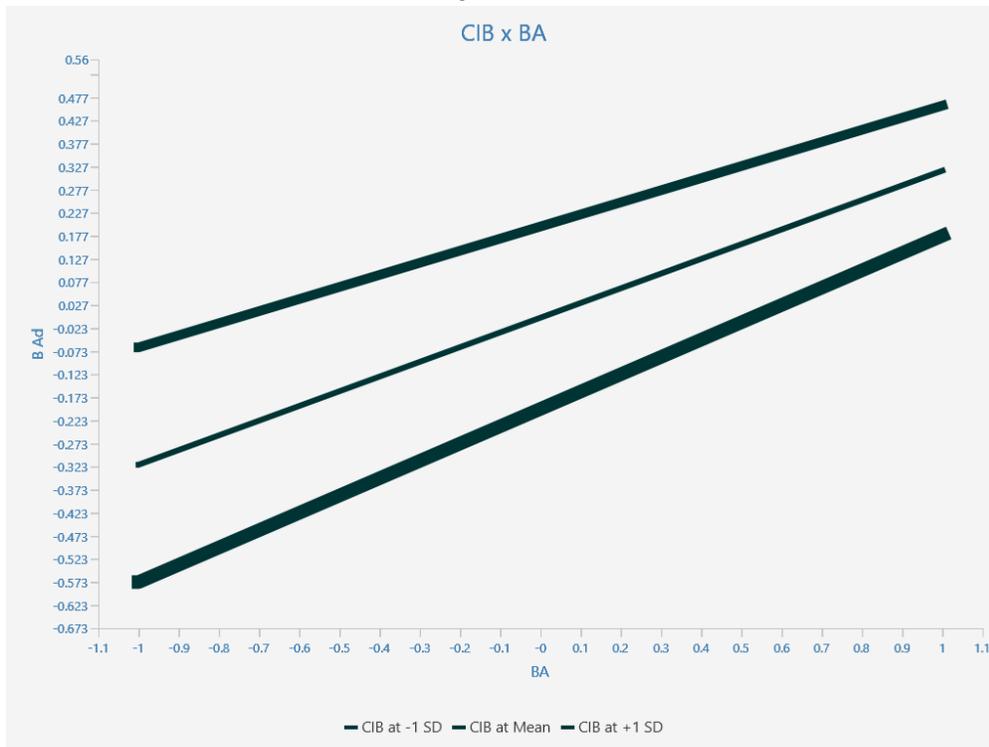


Figure 3: The slope analysis

Discussion

The study aimed to respond to the researcher's call to investigate the antecedents of brand advocacy. This study empirically tested the impact of brand associations and beliefs on brand advocacy in the tourism sector. The study also considered the impact of brand associations on brand beliefs. It has also tested the mediation impact of brand beliefs on brand association and brand advocacy. Additionally, this study has introduced and tested customers' irrational beliefs as a moderator. The study employed the MODE model of attitude and behaviors.

The results of the study have revealed the positive impact of brand associations on brand beliefs. As both brand associations and brand beliefs are considered as attitudes but their bases are different. Brand associations are affect-based whereas beliefs are cognition based. The results of this study correspond to the notion that affect-based structures can impact cognition (Bodur et al., 2000).

The impact of brand association on brand advocacy has also been positive. The results are in line with the MODE model either situational or deliberative. Justifying the associations producing advocacy, the association of the place in the mind of the consumer makes them talk about the place and advocate it to others. A similar condition holds for the impact of beliefs on advocacy which according to the result of the study is positive. When tourists have interacted with a place and have generated positive beliefs about it, it will be reflected in their behavior in the form of advocacy.

Tian and Kamran (2021) have argued the facilitating capacity of brand beliefs. The results of the study also endorse that brand beliefs can facilitate the impact. According to the results, brand beliefs have positively mediated the

relationship between brand association and brand advocacy. The MODE model (Fazio, 1990) also supports the finding as a positive attitude will bring about positive behavior. As per the results, positive association of the place built positive beliefs which make the tourist consider the place positive and advocate about it.

While mentioning the positive beliefs and their impact, the study has shown the weakening impact of customer irrational beliefs on the advocacy. The justification lies in the MODE model, irrational beliefs can be negative, and as negative beliefs are not consistent with the positive behavior hence the weakening impact of customer irrational beliefs on brand advocacy is observed. A tourist will advocate a place when all the associations and beliefs are positive in their mind. As mentioned earlier, places are multidimensional (Tosun et al., 2021). Hence, they have different stake holders and with the irrational beliefs about the treatment from a service provider can impact the overall experience of the place and tourist will not advocate the place positively.

Theoretical Contribution

The study has numerous theoretical contributions. First, the study has made an effort to identify the determinants and antecedents of brand advocacy on the call of researchers (see. Ali et al., 2023; Bhati & Verma, 2020; Saini & Arasanmi, 2021) which were yet to be considered. Second, it has established the relationship between brand association and beliefs that was scarce in the literature. Third, the study has attempted to add to the scant literature on customer irrational beliefs. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the only study on customer irrational beliefs by Seger-Guttmann (2019) has advised to identify its implications across various service sectors, this research considered it in the tourism sector.

Practical Implications

The study has many practical implications. As brand associations are mostly non-verbal (Goyal, 2020), destination managers need to enhance the outlook of the place to provide an appealing visual presence that can impact the senses of tourists and they unconsciously or consciously start associating with the place. Wilk et al. (2021) argues that tourists often look for places using social media platforms. It is then important for managers to provide the information about the place along with appealing visuals on the social media platforms to become part of the consumer's unconscious mind. as the managers are branding the place, it is important to introduce and highlight the places of historical or cultural importance so that tourist can associate themselves with the places and have a feeling of pride to visit it. Similarly, while branding, managers need to be careful to avoid any misinformation regarding the place, brand beliefs can make people feel good about the place based on their perception of the place.

It is pertinent for the managers to plan place experiences in a way that tourists start spreading word about it. Destination managers need to use social media for their benefit. They can create communities of the places they are managing where people can share their experiences of the visited places and can motivate others to visit too. Those communities can also help identify tourists who try to shun any negative comment about the place. Destination managers can get in touch with those tourists to help communicate well about the place. Another important consideration for brand managers is that tourists advocate about overall experiences of places rather just visually appealing sites. Thus, it is manager's duty to create a smooth experience which can let tourists have only positive associations and beliefs so they advocate the place with complete zeal. For great experiences of place, the destination managers need to get in touch with the service

providers around the important tourist spots and train them to understand the psychology of the tourist. The tourist may have irrational beliefs, but it is important for the service provider to facilitate the tourists as much as they can. Facilitating tourists is important for two reasons i) they provide monetary benefits ii) they will talk about the place and positive interactions will increase the footfall. Hence, it is important for managers to learn that they need to work on create strong associations and beliefs of the place and minimize any negative or irrational beliefs so tourists advocate the place and become the asset for destination managers.

Limitations and Future Research

There are certain limitations of the study and potential for future research. First, the study has considered cross-sectional data, whereas in future longitudinal studies should be considered as they can benefit the research. Second, the study considered two similar attitudes, future researchers can consider other unexplored antecedents of brand advocacy. Third, this research has considered customer irrational beliefs as a moderator, it has provided a room for future research to consider the other roles of customer irrational beliefs. Lastly, future researchers can consider other industries to replicate the research.

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