What drives Generation Z to advocate for a brand online?

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to: 1) examine the impact of brand-related antecedents; brand social-benefits, brand distinctiveness, brand prestige and brand warmth on online brand advocacy (OBA) behaviour of Gen Z; 2) examine the impact of OBA on consumers' purchase intent; 3) to consider the moderating effect of social media involvement (SMI) on the relationship between the aforementioned antecedents and OBA. Based on an online questionnaire, data from 221 students were analysed using SPSS and Amos 23.0. The structural model reveals all antecedents to be positively related to OBA, which had a subsequent positive impact on purchase intent. Interestingly, SMI did have a moderating effect on the relationship between brand prestige, brand social benefits and OB, indicating the significance of engagement levels of Gen Zers and its impact on their advocacy intentions online. The paper shall be pivotal in enhancing brand trust and loyalty in these turbulent times.

Keywords: online brand advocacy; OBA; brand social benefits; brand prestige; brand distinctiveness; brand warmth; purchase intent; social media.

Biographical notes: Vivek Mishra has completed his Master's in Business Administration from the Regional College of Management, Bhubaneswar and is currently pursuing his PhD in Marketing form KIIT School of Management, Bhubaneswar. After a stint of around ten years in the corporate domain, he has more than five years of in academics and is currently working as Management Faculty at the IIIT Bhubaneswar. His areas of research interest are primarily focused on Gen Z consumer behaviour.

Biswajit Das has close to three decades of experience in academia, industry and government. Besides, he worked as the Deputy Registrar (Academics) at the KIIT University, Chairperson – Doctoral Program, Chairperson – Marketing Management Area and member – Academic Council - KIIT-U and member –

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1   Introduction

During the process of purchase decision making, buyers are often influenced by their social circle as a part of their need for social conformity. However, the degree of such influence varies across individuals depending on various psychological, cultural, behavioural and product category factors (Badrinarayanan and Laverie, 2011). The burden of social conformity is growing on the majority of consumers on account of increased connectivity across offline and specifically online communication platforms. For example, individuals tend to conform to the views of the majority, even if it is contradictory to their opinion. Specifically, while during social media discussions on social and political matters, partaking in providing online reviews, and purchasing products which lack detailed information (Wijenayake, 2020). Contextually, buyers are increasingly caring for the opinion of others, thereby amassing a pool of opinions, which could alter their overall brand perceptions (Ozuem et al., 2021). Companies are constantly striving to improve their brand engagement levels through the proper use of communication tools and platforms. However, customers are relying more on the opinions expressed by friends, fans, followers and family (Tsen and Cheng, 2021). Together, they paint their distinct image of brands, which is quite in contrast to the image that organisations intend to project (Kotler et al., 2017). The facilitation of such platonic interactions between individuals has primarily accounted for the rising number of social media platforms coupled with a tremendous escalation in the usage of mobile devices. Such escalations in mobile device usage and recent developments in web-based technology have led to the emergence of a completely new avatar of the web, i.e., Web 3.0, which is mostly centric around collaboration (Moghadamzadeh et al., 2020). As users spend a considerable amount of time across various social platforms, these platforms which mirror Web 3.0 act as the ideal backdrop for C2C and customer to many customers (C2MC) interactions (Ebrahimi et al., 2020). This provides tremendous opportunities for the various stakeholders of Web 3.0 to gain deeper insights into the needs and choices of consumers (Estiri et al., 2018).

Trends of increased mobile device usage are on a continuous rise and it is expected to relate every individual on the face of this Earth, virtually (Al-Nabhani et al., 2021). Considered to be one of the biggest factors for internet usage, widespread adoption of reasonably priced smartphones has also fostered better social reach for a large number of individuals (Farzin et al., 2021). The behaviour of buyers has transformed into something substantially unique, as they can get the opinion of experts at the touch of a button to facilitate their evaluation of product alternatives. Under such a vast virtual network operating at an individuals' fingertips, the reason to depend on social conformity is expected to be at its peak. Most decisions pertaining to personal purchases will essentially be social choices, with customers continuously interacting with each other and sharing their opinions about brands and organisations as a whole. Mobilised with the aid of their virtual devices, customers intertwine their offline and online activities by internet usage, specifically in the context of social media platforms. The development of the

online link between consumers in the current scenario is considered to be a way of life and they have greater control over social media environments in comparison to the marketer (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). Considered to be more sceptical (Laran et al., 2011), consumers find online communications from other buyers to be more trustworthy as compared to communications from the company (Harrigan et al., 2021).

Recent developments in mobile applications have redefined the digital era, through progressive technology which benefits its users and providers alike. For example developments such as gamification, have become potent tool for marketers to target specific customer segments. E-commerce giants such as Amazon have also embraced gamification as a tool for effective marketing and increased customer engagement (Kumar et al., 2020). An outstanding application of such mobile applications is the increased introduction of mobile health applications after the outbreak of COVID-19 (Kapoor et al., 2020). At a time, when governments were pushed beyond boundaries to disseminate information and educate the masses on various aspects of the pandemic, such applications have come to the rescue. These applications have played a pivotal role in reducing the burden of healthcare systems. They have also facilitated home self-assessment, and increased access to timely information and statistics.

From the perspective of marketing communications, customers are no longer mere passive targets but are becoming active media of communications. Consequentially, a large number of companies are using this phenomenon to their benefit by utilising this communication between individuals to attract other prospective buyers (Wood et al., 2018). We can take the example of 'Lego Ideas', an online platform where individuals of various age groups vote for their favourite toys, leave feedback, and even submit new ideas. The Lego Group, a famous Danish toy manufacturing company, can utilise this online community not only to engage more with their customers but also to gather market data about their brand. However, we have to also understand the level of complexity experienced by companies in embracing this. Sometimes, companies might need to alter their marketing communications and create tailored communication to address individual customers. Organisations have lost complete control over user interactions with the emergence of community-generated content and they risk losing credibility by restricting content. In case anything goes wrong with their product, they must also be prepared for a massive social backlash, that being said, brands having sincere claims about their products have nothing to worry about (Wilk et al., 2020). To their dismay, advertisers making false claims or having poor products will no longer survive. It is practically not possible to hide flaws or isolate customer complaints in a transparent, virtual world.

In the context of the above, online C2C communications, have led to crucial exchanges on online discussion forums having a substantial impact on buyer behaviour (Adjei et al., 2010).

On such forums, interactions involve both pro and negative opinions regarding brands, often a mixed bag of voiced views. Such interactions have clear implications for brand managers, as they compete on an international level, requiring to keep continuous control of their brands and implements new online brand patronage strategies. Studies in the past have suggested that for effective brand control, an improved understanding of the consumers' motives behind online brand advice is a must (Keylock and Faulds, 2012). In other words, they have to understand the "strong, influential, purposeful and non-incentivized online representation of a brand, in the brand's best interest", otherwise known as online brand advocacy (OBA). It essentially concerns how purchasers speak

online about brands and the ways by which they suggest for their brands online to different purchasers (Choi et al., 2021).

Fundamentally, marketers need to understand the underlying motives for such consumer-driven OBA and its implications pertaining to their purchase behaviour. Considering the changing consumer journey, which has made an outcome-based transition from mere loyalty to advocacy, examining the key drivers of OBA is pivotal. To the best of our knowledge research on OBA is limited and we intend to fill this gap through our study. Directionally, this research was carried out based on the following goals:

1   To determine the impact of brand warmth (BW), brand prestige (BP), brand social benefits, brand distinctiveness (BD) on OBA behaviour of Gen Z consumers.

2   To find the impact of OBA on the purchase intent (PI) of Gen Z consumers.

3   To determine the role of social media involvement (SMI) as a moderator between BW, BP, brand social benefits, BD and OBA.

2   Review of literature

2.1   Brand implications of Generation Z

A number of consumer behaviour researchers have identified differences across generations, when it comes to online brand communications (Msallati, 2021). Segmentation based on age cohorts focuses on the dynamics of brand communications on social media. For identifying the driving forces behind generational engagement with varied content, it is pivotal for marketers to adopt segmentation frameworks based on age cohorts. According to recent research (Sawaftah et al., 2021), as compared to previous age cohorts, Generation Z often seeks to develop a more profound and emotional brand connect. Values such as honesty and transparency mean a lot to this generation, when it comes to engaging with content. As an essential element of their social media communications, Generation Zers share their life experiences on a regular basis. The primary objective behind sharing is to get more 'likes' and increase the number of followers (Doctoroff, 2019). Simultaneously, they are also cautious about the content of the communication and tend to act more responsibly as compared to previous age cohorts (Gu, 2017). As per some researchers Marc-Olivier (2017), although Generation Zers are attentive towards brand developments yet they rank low in the loyalty aspect. However, an interesting aspect of Gen Zers is that they are strongly inclined towards local brands and can be considered as ethnocentric consumers (Aomei Group, 2016).

2.2   The emergence of brand advocacy

Shifts in the marketing paradigm from push-based, to relationship-based and recently to trust-based marketing, is suggestive of the increasing importance of brand advocacy (Pilotti et al., 2011). The active nature of the modern-day consumer has led them to gain control over their purchase decisions by gaining more insights about brands, to make informed pre-purchase decisions (Urban, 2005), word-of-mouth acting as a facilitator (East et al., 2008). The importance of brand advocates has been cited by previous

literature, specifically in offline settings, and suggests that they may be ignoring their most vocal advocates, i.e., their customers. In their study based in an offline setting, Bhati and Verma (2020) have necessitated the crucial role of brand advocacy in achieving brand success. They labelled it as 'word-of-mouth advocacy' and found it to be an important indicator of an organisations' growth, on account of its positive impact on the brand. This impact could ultimately translate into enhanced positioning, increased brand equity, and ultimately improved sales (Vivek et al., 2012).

2.3 Shift in brand advocacy from offline to online

Based on the increased adoption of smart mobile devices and emerging social media platforms, online C2MC communication, has completely transformed connectivity between customers (Wilk et al., 2018). Encompassing brand advocacy in the online sphere, C2MC communications are reminiscent of consumer's attitudes and overall behaviour towards brands (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). As far as virtual platforms are concerned, socialising, networking, and opportunities for information sharing have been identified as the primary drivers of consumer connectedness (Smith et al., 2012). Free, honest, and anonymous expression of consumer's attitudes, opinions, and experiences, linked to a brand at a global level has spearheaded the subsequent exploration of online opinion sharing (Langer and Beckman, 2005). More likely to occur in an online social setting (Chu and Kim, 2011), the sharing of views online can facilitate communication at a multidirectional level, spread the consumers' opinion to a global virtual audience, often influencing their purchase decisions (Ardiansyah and Sarwoko, 2020).

2.4 Various forms of OBA

OBA has been considered to be taking various forms, such as: e-WOM springing up from Facebook 'likes' and online advice to connections (Wallace et al., 2012), customer brand engagement on Facebook or brand following on Twitter (Bulearca and Bulearca, 2010). It is also linked to situations such as: new product information submitted by customers on YouTube, specific blogs where users discuss brands (Chu and Kamal, 2008), and also by posting online reviews on various e-tail and social platforms (Karakaya and Barnes, 2010). OBA has also been associated with C2MC interactions on online platforms, incorporating various online discussion forums, communities and platforms for social networking such as: booking.com, beautytalk.com, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Various researchers have also attempted to describe OBA in the context of viral marketing (Blazevic et al., 2013) and also labelled it as C2C communication (Libai et al., 2010). Considering the various references to brand advocacy related to e-WOM, it is conceivable that numerous research studies chose to utilise WOM measured to quantify OBA (Wallace et al., 2014). Outlining the association among self-expressive brands, preferred on Facebook and brand advocacy of buyers in offline and online situations, Wallace et al. (2014) named it as social network advocacy.

2.5 OBA and its antecedents

With regards to brand advocacy, past explorations have recognised various brand-related antecedents which are directly and positively identified with brand advocacy, including: brand prominence, brand loyalty, brand association with self, brand love, brand

identification (Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008), brand reputation, attachment towards the brand (Park et al., 2010; Dick and Basu, 1994; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006) and customer-company identification. Various such brand-related constructs have been featured by Stokburger-Sauer et al.'s (2012) exploration, comprising: BD, brand-self similarity, BP, brand social benefits, BW and memorable brand experiences. The authors likewise recommended that customer brand identification (CBI) had both cognitive and conative angles to it. Accordingly, CBI is controlled by the degree to which an individual sees that the brand has a character that is like his/her own, be extraordinary or unmistakable, and be renowned. As observed by studies in the past, certain levels of similarities between the brand and the buyer's self-image can be considered to be key in comprehending the CBI. As a result, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1 (H1)   BP has a positive influence on OBA.

Hypothesis 2 (H2)   Brand social (BS) has a positive influence on OBA.

Hypothesis 3 (H3)   BW has a positive influence on OBA.

Hypothesis 4 (H4)   BD has a positive influence on OBA.

2.6   OBA and its outcomes

Research studies in the past have demonstrated that buyers trust and follow up on suggestions from their friends (Keylock and Faulds, 2012). Acting as intermediaries for offline conversations, online brand conversations seem to affect the offline purchasing decisions of consumers (Libai et al., 2010). According to Fagerstrøm and Ghinea (2011), reasonable online recommendations positively affected online purchase decisions and therefore online C2MC can be depicted through a relational effect (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). Such an effect seemed to rely on the prime rule of buyer behaviour that purchasers can apply amazing consequences for one another (Haywood, 1989). Hence, it appears to be likely that OBA impacts the PI of consumers. The study by Sun et al. (2006) has demonstrated that providers of opinions (OBA senders) are likewise seekers of opinion (OBA beneficiaries). Previous studies have also indicated that individuals' support online is to such an extent that the jobs of 'sender' and 'beneficiary' are not fundamentally unrelated (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). This implies the individuals who are exceptionally involved and take an interest online are frequently profoundly included as both 'senders' and 'beneficiaries' of information (Parrott et al., 2015).

2.7   Brand awareness and OBA

Consumers can access a variety of sources of information via online communication, socialising, and networking platforms, whether they are company or consumer-driven. These online platforms help customers become more aware of brands by giving them an easy way to access unbiased brand information (Schivinski et al., 2020). Consumers who are 'informed, connected, and active' now place a higher importance on the knowledge and experience of others in their networks than on company-controlled marketing messages (Wilk et al., 2020). As initially reported, a recent PricewaterhouseCoopers (2020) survey found that 67% of shoppers read or submit social media reviews and comments, which boosts brand information and influences their online shopping behaviour. Virtual communities are crucial for online C2MC communication because

they allow for the sharing of product information and experiences, which can influence PI or actual purchase. Furthermore, online brand discussions can serve as proxies for offline discussions and have been shown to influence offline purchasing decisions (Bakhtiari, 2020). A number of researchers (Bhati and Verma, 2020) focus on the consumer journey research, to identify the key drivers at multiple touchpoints which can accelerate the journey from awareness to advocacy.

2.8   Ramifications of OBA for the customer and the brand

Previous research has also delved into exploring the impact of online C2MC, and opines that such communications have a potential impact on the online advocacy phenomenon (Lawer and Knox, 2006) and also in the latest industry research (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020). Online correspondence, socialising, and networking (for example, online networks and their conversation discussions) empower customers to get to a variety of information, which be both organisation and buyer-driven. Such online platforms give customers a proficient method to accumulate unprejudiced brand-related information from different buyers and it is in these stages that various customers engage in OBA and exchange relevant insights related to brands. Based on a critical standard of buyer behaviour (Senecal and Nantel, 2004), online C2MC can be leveraged upon by marketers by utilising the influence exerted by one shopper on another during the purchase decision (Haywood, 1989). Considered to have a significant impact on consumers' buying behaviour, shopper-driven OBA is considered to be a manifestation of online interpersonal influence In the context of influencing buying behaviour, the very idea of C2MC manifests itself in OBA and is found to have a strong impact in facilitating consumers' choices (Keylock and Faulds, 2012). The role of OBA is specifically more pivotal in the case of the modern-day consumer, who is more dynamic, educated and connected. Such individuals also tend to place more trust on the information and experiences of other people in their online social networks, as compared to marketer-driven communications (Lawer and Knox, 2006). Research studies in the past focusing on brand advocacy have validated this phenomenon by confirming that purchasers' trust and follow-up on the purchase suggestions made by their companions (Keylock and Faulds, 2012), and have also indicated the significant impact of brand-related online C2MC on buyers' purchase behaviour (Adjei et al., 2010). As a result, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 5 (H5)   OBA has a positive impact on the consumers' PI.

2.9   Defining the constructs

Apart from OBA, the other five major constructs are defined in this section.

- *BD:* Based on both positive and negative aspects of a brand, online brand advocates often engage in continuous brand comparisons, and tend to freely express the distinctive features of a brand across various platforms (Kemp, 2018). According to many such advocates, a brand can be considered to be distinct based on its relative quality, price and success, which are considered to be strong indicators of uniqueness (Keylock and Faulds, 2012).

- *BP:* When advocating for niche and luxury brands, advocates often took its reputation/supremacy into account, the phenomena has also been validated by a number of online brand advocates who admit spreading a good word for brands ranking high in the hierarchy (Wilk et al., 2018).

- *BS benefits:* Online brand advocates were found to be very keen on presenting their use of a brand and also how other customers of the brand used or recognised the same. Some of the remarks made by them also exemplified the manner in which an organisation provided them with an opportunity to socialise or gain social validation from other consumers, making them part of an offline or online brand culture (Chou et al., 2016). Considered to be social rewards of using a brand, its social benefits included, social acceptance from non-brand consumers, or from the broader offline or online community (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

- *BW:* An analysis of various OBA posts revealed a relatively mild personality of the brand being discussed, which is indicative of a feeling of warmth towards the brand. It was further observed that online brand advocates were not afraid to share their fondness for the brand. However, such affection was often found to be based on their 'warm' impressions of the brand, which they referred to be just like they feel about their friends and the way they got along with them (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

- *PI:* Studies in the past argue that two instances can be considered to be strong indicators of consumers' intention to purchase. To begin with, the first instance is when the intention of the advocate's purchase of the brand again and continuously in the future has also been specifically stated in their OBA posts (Parrott et al., 2015). Additionally, when the posts concerning OBA are often replied to by a recipient of OBA, conveying their intention to buy or letting other members know they have purchased the brand they are advocating for. Notably, OBA recipients also keep advocates in their loop for other online communications related to the brand (Wilk et al., 2020).

2.10   Moderating effect of SMI

Credible content delivery, co-creation, and responsiveness are favourably associated to users' endorsement of brands toward other users, according to a study by Choi et al. (2021). Brand advocacy has a beneficial impact on brand advocates' buying intentions. The authors further state that the association between brand advocacy and purchase intentions is moderated by the amount of time spent on Facebook. According to the study by Dang (2021), social media use has a favourable impact on information sharing, relationship quality, and social life satisfaction. Furthermore, sharing information has a favourable impact on relationship quality, which is linked to social life pleasure. Furthermore, information sharing moderates the relationship between social networking sites use and relationship quality, but not the relationship between social networking sites use and societal pleasure. Bianchi and Andrews (2018) conducted research to better understand the key factors of consumer-brand engagement, which might lead to purchase intentions. The findings suggest that peer communication, compatibility, and legitimacy influence customers' attitudes regarding communicating with retail brands through social media sites, and that attitude has a significant impact on intentions to engage in this behaviour. Furthermore, there is a strong link between engagement intentions and

the possibility of making a purchase via a retailer's social media page. Thus, consumers having a higher level of social media engagement, tend to actively process product-related information, are more connected to various other communication channels, are more emotionally engaged with the brand, and partake in gathering information that is likely to lead to favourable cognitive responses. As a result, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 6 (H6) SMI moderates the relationship between OBA and its antecedents.
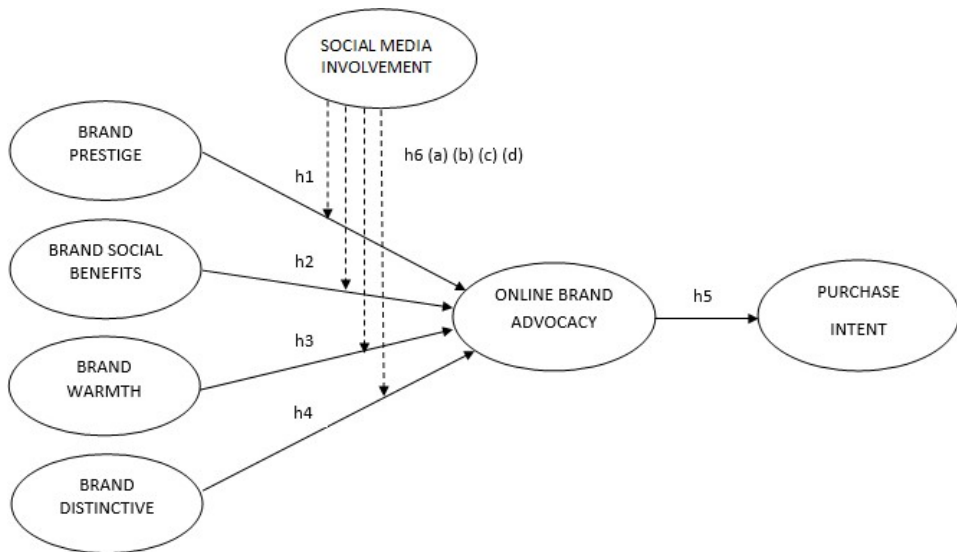
H6a SMI moderates the relationship between BP and OBA.

H6b SMI moderates the relationship between BS and OBA.

H6c SMI moderates the relationship between BW and OBA.

H6d SMI moderates the relationship between BD and OBA.

Figure 1 Proposed research model

Source: Authors own depiction

3 Research methodology

3.1 The student survey

In this study, a quantitative research methodology was adopted and, by implementing a convenience sampling technique, an online questionnaire containing 30 questions was administered to student-members of 'KIIT University Friends', Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/2018822171726555). Following the critical incident technique, the respondents were asked to "think of a time when they had a positive experience with a brand and how you reacted to this experience in their online communications with others." Prompted by a statement that preceded each item that said

"When I discuss this brand online, I often…", respondents were asked to rate each item on a Likert-type scale [ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5)].

3.2   Survey sample characteristics

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the survey sample. 76% of participants (N = 169) belonged to the 23–25 year age group, who are considered to be more familiar with the value of brand contact through social media (Wilk et al., 2018). With respect to gender, the male respondents comprised of 67% of the sample (N = 149), whereas females comprised of 33% (N = 72). The subsequent section depicts the SMI of the respondents, it is observed that the majority of the respondents (42%) use SNS's on a regular basis (N = 92), with 46% (N = 101) using a desktop computer for the same and 37% (N = 82) used a mobile phone for access. These preferences can be suggestive of the fact that, when it comes to mere access to SNS, students prefer to use the mobile phone but in case of uploading photos or posting other details, they prefer to use a device with a bigger screen, having better navigation options. The statistics further reveal that around 27% (N = 59) of the respondents use more than five SNS's, thereby indicating a high-level of social media activity. Interestingly, over 30% (N = 67), checked their SNS account on every beep, possibly indicating higher levels of social media engagement. Over 31% (N = 70), checked their social media account in every 15 minutes, possibly indicating a FOMO effect and as expected weekends saw an upsurge in SNS use, with over 40% (N = 90) displaying such behaviour patterns.

Table 1   Respondent characteristics

Demographic characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Age group	17–19	29	13.1
	20–22	23	10.4
	23–25	169	76.5
Gender	Female	72	32.6
	Male	149	67.4
SMI			
SNS use	Regularly	92	41.6
	Occasionally	54	24.4
	Rarely	75	33.9
Preferred device	Desktop computer	101	45.7
	Laptop	38	17.2
	Mobile	82	37.1
Number of SNS used actively	One	80	36.2
	Two	18	8.1
	Three	24	10.9
	Four	22	10.0
	Five	18	8.1
	More than 5	59	26.7

Table 1 Respondent characteristics (continued)

Demographic characteristics		Frequency	Percent
SMI			
Checking SNSs account per day	On every notification beep	67	30.3
	1–2 times per day	15	6.8
	3–4 times per day	29	13.1
	5–6 times per day	12	5.4
	7–8 times per day	40	18.1
	9 + times per day	58	26.2
Checking SNSs account per day	Less than 15 min	70	31.7
	Half hour–one hour	20	9.0
	1–2 hrs.	17	7.7
	3–4 hrs.	19	8.6
	5–6 hrs.	18	8.1
	7–8 hrs.	33	14.9
	9 hrs. and more	44	19.9
Increase in SNSs use	Day time	71	32.1
	Evening	37	16.7
	Night	23	10.4
	Weekends	90	40.7
Recency of using SNSs	Less than one year ago	74	33.5
	1–2 years ago	12	5.4
	3–4 years ago	14	6.3
	5–6 years ago	11	5.0
	7–8 years ago	14	6.3
	9–10 years ago	15	6.8
	More than 10 years ago	81	36.7

3.3 Confirmatory factor analysis

All the six constructs, namely: BW, BP, BD, brand social benefits, OBA and PI were measured as latent variables in the model. Through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), all the six variables were allowed to covary freely. According to the results: relative χ^2 (CMIN/df) was 1.232, which lies between the range of 1 to 3 and is indicative of reasonable fit (Wheaton et al., 1977), *root mean square error of approximation* (RMSEA) = 0.034 is less than 0.08 and indicates a reasonable error of approximation (Hu and Bentler, 1999), *standardised root mean square residual* (SRMR) = 0.049 is indicative of good it as the value was less than 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), *goodness of fit index* (GFI) = 0.916 was above the recommended value of 0.90 and is indicative of good fit (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1984), *comparative fit index* (CFI) = 0.989 was close to 1 and is indicative of good fit (Bentler, 1990) and *Tucker-Lewis coefficient* (TLI) = 0.983 which also indicates good fit as the value was closer to 1 (Bentler and Bonett, 1980). Table 2 shows the individual variables along with their factor loadings (FL), obtained

from CFA, after the loading has been extracted below the cut-off value of 0.50. The Cronbach alpha of all items used was above 0.70 after a subsequent reliability evaluation of the data obtained, which surpassed the suggested threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1979). The calculated FL were higher than the suggested factor value of 0.50 and ranged from 0.680 (OBA2) to 0.944 (BW2) (Hair et al., 2018). Subsequently, all of the scale items were retained due to adequate FL for the structural model evaluation. Based on the obtained values, we retained the measurement model for further structural modelling and testing of hypotheses.

Table 2   Measurement instrument

Variable	Item	α	Mean	SD
Brand warmth (BW) ($\alpha = 0.89$)	KIIT generates warm sentiments among its students	0.83	2.40	1.02
	KIIT is a brand liked by everyone	0.94	2.23	0.85
	My emotions towards KIIT are emotional in nature	0.84	2.24	0.87
Brand distinctiveness (BD) ($\alpha = 0.88$)	KIIT has a special identity	0.80	3.14	0.96
	KIIT is unique	0.87	3.17	0.97
	KIIT stands out from its competitors	0.87	3.16	1.02
Brand prestige (BP) ($\alpha = 0.77$)	KIIT is prestigious	0.88	3.30	0.94
	KIIT is one of the best education brands	0.80	3.26	0.88
	KIIT is a first-class, high-quality brand	0.80	3.32	0.90
Purchase intent (PI) ($\alpha = 0.91$)	I would not hesitate to study further in KIIT	0.86	3.57	0.93
	In the future, I am likely to continue studying at KIIT	0.83	3.57	0.91
	In the future, I intend to study further in KIIT	0.88	3.82	0.79
	If I had to do it again, I would choose KIIT	0.81	3.40	0.97
	I would like to explore KIIT's courses in future	0.76	3.70	0.86
Online brand advocacy (OBA) ($\alpha = 0.84$)	Express proactive and reactive defence of KIIT	0.77	2.84	0.90
	Share positive and favourable communication about KIIT	0.68	3.08	0.93
	Share relevant information about KIIT	0.92	3.03	0.97
	Express virtual visual manifestation in support of KIIT	0.89	3.05	0.96
Brand social benefits (BS) ($\alpha = 0.80$)	KIIT provides a perfect platform for socialising	0.78	4.09	0.71
	I feel a connection with others from KIIT	0.89	4.01	0.69
	Interacting with others at KIIT provides a lot of benefits	0.88	4.01	0.71
	KIIT makes me feel like I belong to a special group	0.88	4.01	0.71

3.4   Validity

The convergent validity (CV) and discriminant validity (DV) were subsequently calculated as extremely significant measures of the assessment measurement model. Composite reliability (CR) and average variance derived (AVE) have been determined to measure CV (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012). As shown in Table 3, the values of the AVE ranged

from 0.670 (OBA) to 0.761 (BWR), which was higher than the acceptable value of 0.50, for all the constructs. In the range 0.873 (BP) to 0.919 (BS), the CR values were satisfactory and well above the recommended value of 0.70, the AVE and CR values obtained in our study suggesting CV (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The square root of AVE of each building has been contrasted with its inter-construct correlation in order to test the DV. The AVE's square root of a construct should be greater than its correlation with other constructs to obtain a sufficient DV (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In addition, the values diagonally displayed in the corresponding columns and rows should be greater than the off-diagonal values (Henseler et al., 2012). As shown in Table 3, the square root of the AVE (represented diagonally with italic values) exceeded the inter-construct correlations suggesting an acceptable degree of DV, thereof.

Table 3   Correlation between factors along with √AVE on the diagonal

	CR	AVE	MSV	OBA	BS	BW	BD	BP	PI
OBA	0.889	0.670	0.224	*0.819*					
BS	0.919	0.739	0.259	0.335	*0.860*				
BW	0.905	0.761	0.144	0.380	0.207	*0.873*			
BD	0.881	0.712	0.316	0.416	0.192	0.277	*0.844*		
BP	0.873	0.697	0.316	0.411	0.223	0.327	0.562	*0.835*	
PI	0.917	0.688	0.259	0.473	0.509	0.253	0.324	0.452	*0.830*

Table 4   Model fit indices from SEM output

Fit index	Recommended value	Structural model
χ^2	NS at $p < 0.05$	277.098
df	n/a	188
χ^2/df	< 3	1.474
GFI	> 0.90	0.903
AGFI	> 0.80	0.870
CFI	> 0.95	0.975
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.046 (LO = 0.034, HI = 0.058)
NFI	> 0.90	0.926

Note: GFI: goodness of fit index, AGFI: adjusted goodness-of-fit index,
     CFI: comparative fit index, df: degrees of freedom, NFI: normed fit index and
     RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation.
         Source: Hu and Bentler (1999)

3.5   Evaluation of the structural model

The SEM output obtained from the analysis done by using Amos 23.0 was evaluated based on the recommended indices for model fit. To improve the overall model fit, we utilised the function of modification indices set at a threshold value of 10. Based on the suggestions obtained in the output, direct covariates paths were added between some error terms, which improved the overall model fit to an agreeable extent. The results illustrated in Table 4 suggest that the proposed model was a good fit, the relative χ^2 (CMIN/df) statistic was 1.474, which was well below the recommended value of < 0.03

(Marsh and Hocevar, 1985; Bentler, 1990). The goodness of fit index (GFI) and CFI indices obtained had a value of .903 and .975 respectively which surpassed the cut-off value of > .90 (Chau, 1997). The RMSEA index was .046 and was in the excellent range (Hu and Bentler, 1999) and the indices obtained for NFI was 0.926, which was above the recommended value of > .90 (Bentler and Bonett, 1980).

Table 5　　Output of the PROCESS macro for moderation

Model 1 (R^2 change .0168)	Coeff.	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.580	0.500	5.200	0.000	1.600	3.560
BP	0.140	0.150	0.920	0.360	–0.160	0.440
SMI	–0.320	0.140	–2.230	0.030	–0.600	–0.040
Int_1	0.090	0.040	2.120	0.040	0.010	0.180
Model 2 (R^2 change .0175)	Coeff.	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	–0.251	0.811	–0.309	0.758	–1.850	1.348
BS	0.827	0.202	4.089	0.000	0.428	1.225
SMI	0.460	0.232	1.982	0.049	0.003	0.916
Int_1	–0.120	0.057	–2.094	0.037	–0.233	–0.007
Model 3 (R^2 change .0001)	Coeff.	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.276	0.339	6.707	0.000	1.607	2.945
BW	0.340	0.148	2.304	0.022	0.049	0.632
SMI	–0.037	0.106	–0.352	0.725	–0.246	0.171
Int_1	0.008	0.046	0.182	0.856	–0.082	0.099
Model 4 (R^2 change .0004)	Coeff.	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.049	0.440	4.662	0.000	1.183	2.915
BD	0.328	0.142	2.317	0.021	0.049	0.607
SMI	–0.072	0.130	–0.553	0.581	0.328	0.184
Int_1	0.014	0.041	0.336	0.738	–0.067	0.095

3.6 Moderating effect of SMI

The moderation analysis was carried out using the PROCESS version 3.5 plugin in SPSS using 'model 1'. The output obtained of the PROCESS macro for the four models is illustrated in Table 5. To check the moderation effect, we look for the values against the interaction term – Int_1, where significant values indicate major moderating effects. There are two ways to check the significance:

1　when 'zero' does not lie between the lower and upper confidence intervals (LLCI/ULCI)

2　when the p-value associated with the coefficient is < 0.05, which suggests that the predictive relationship between two variables (X and Y, in 'model 1' of PROCESS macro 3.5) is moderated by a third variable (W) (Hayes, 2016).

Figure 2 Showing the dispersion of the relationship between BP (X) and OBA (Y) for various values of the variable SMI (M) (see online version for colours)
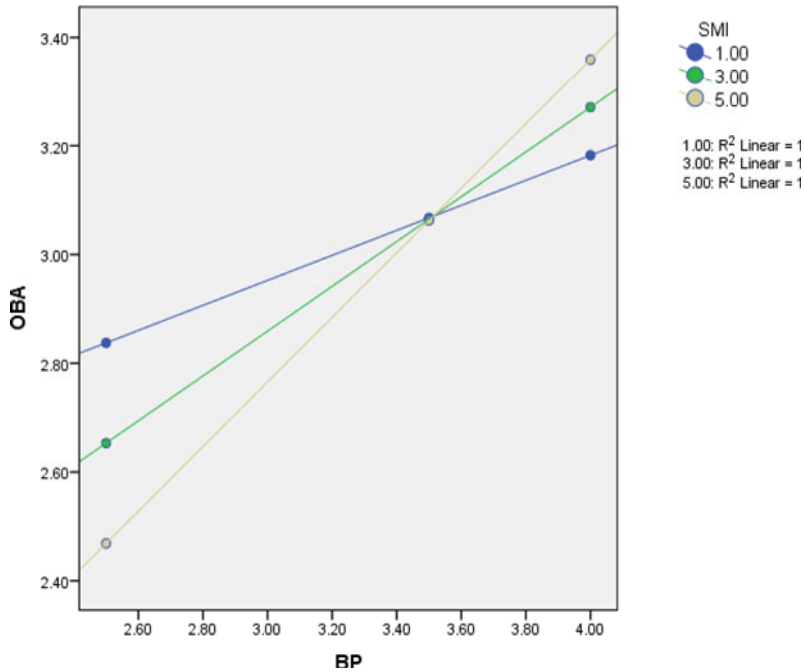

Figure 3 Showing the dispersion of the relationship between BS (X) and OBA (Y) for various values of the variable SMI (M) (see online version for colours)
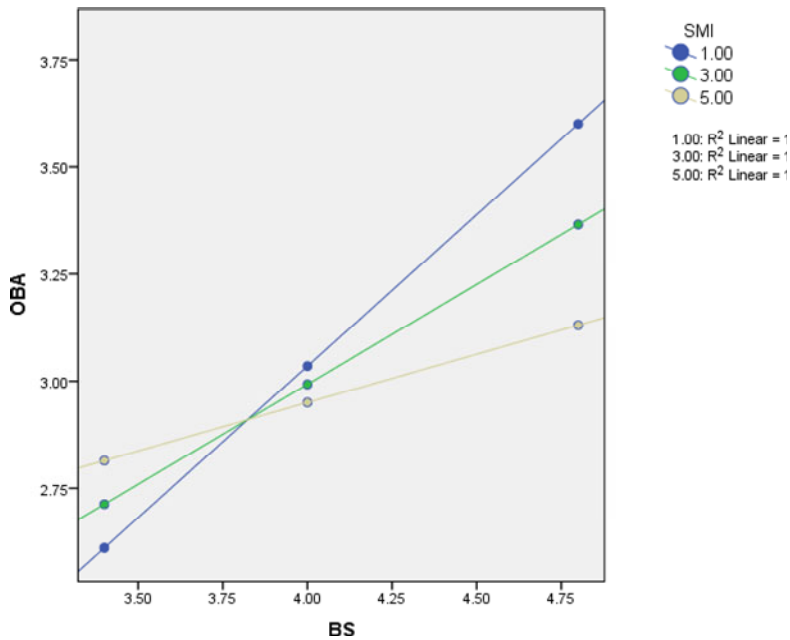
Figure 4 Showing the dispersion of the relationship between BW (X) and OBA (Y) for various
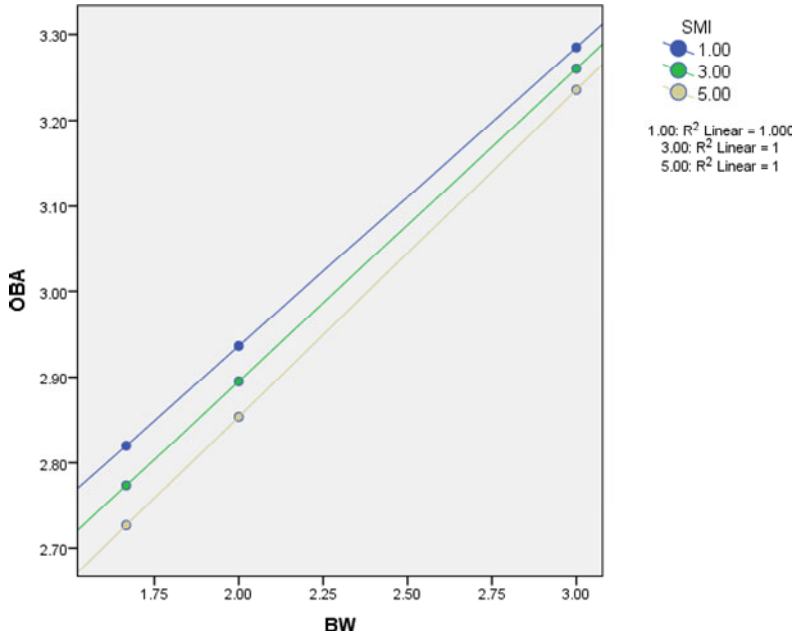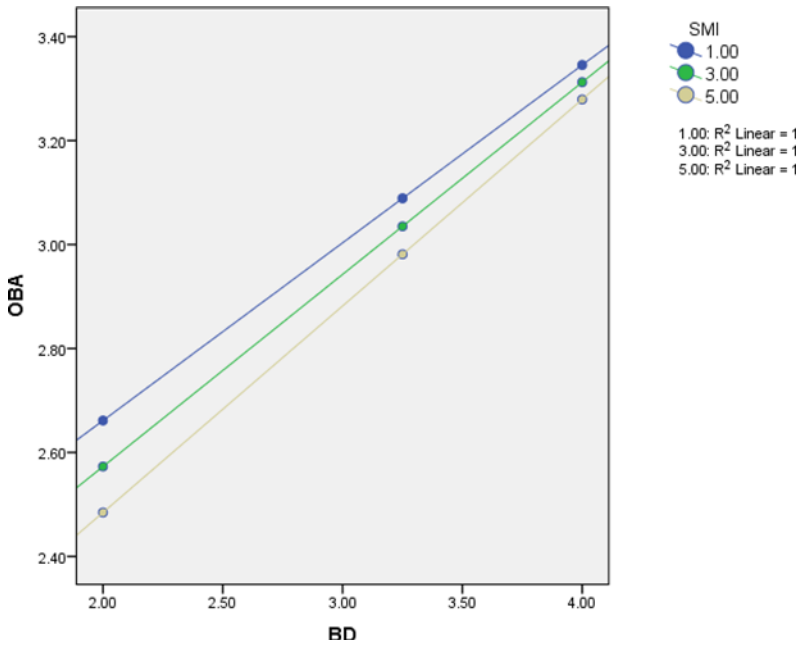values of the variable SMI (M) (see online version for colours)

Figure 5 Showing the dispersion of the relationship between BD (X) and OBA (Y) for various
values of the variable SMI (M) (see online version for colours)

As seen in Table 5, only models 1 and 2 satisfy both conditions 1 and 2 mentioned above. In both the cases (highlighted in Table 5), the p-values are 0.04 and 0.03 respectively, which indicate a moderating effect. Whereas, no significant moderating effect was observed for models 3 and 4. The dispersion of the relationship between X (BP, brand social benefits, BW and BD) and Y (OBA), for various values of the variable M (SMI) are shown in the form of fit lines, represented through Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Table 6   Results of hypothesis

Hypothesis	Path			Estimate	SE	CR	P	Results
H2	OBA	<---	BS	0.366	0.082	4.447	***	Supported
H3	OBA	<---	BW	0.209	0.064	3.264	0.001**	Supported
H1	OBA	<---	BP	0.233	0.077	3.301	0.002**	Supported
H4	OBA	<---	BD	0.171	0.066	2.614	0.009**	Supported
H5	PI	<---	OBA	0.515	0.079	6.525	***	Supported
H6b	OBA	<---	BS	-0.120	0.057	-2.094	0.04**	Supported
H6c	OBA	<---	BW	0.008	0.046	0.182	0.856ns	Not supported
H6a	OBA	<---	BP	0.090	0.040	2.120	0.03**	Supported
H6d	OBA	<---	BD	0.014	0.041	0.336	0.738ns	Not supported

Note: $***p \leq 0.001$, $**p \leq 0.05$ and ns = not significant.

3.7 Results of hypotheses

As can be seen from Table 6, the path coefficient results showed support for every hypothesis including H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6a and H6b. H1 proposed a direct effect from BP on OBA. The path results showed that BP had a positive influence on OBA, B = 0.233, SE = 0.077 and $p < 0.05$. H1 was supported. H2 proposed a direct effect from brand social benefits on OBA. The path results showed that brand social benefits had a positive influence on OBA, B = 0.366, SE = 0.082 and $p < 0.001$. H2 was supported. H3 proposed a direct effect from BW on OBA. The path results showed that BW had a positive influence on OBA, B = 0.209, SE = 0.064 and $p < 0.05$. H3 was supported. H4 proposed a direct effect from BD on OBA. The path results showed that BD had a positive influence on OBA, B = 0.171, SE = 0.066 and $p < 0.05$. H4 was supported. H5 proposed a direct effect from OBA on PI. The path results showed that OBA had a positive influence on PI, B = 0.515, SE = 0.079 and $p < 0.001$. H5 was supported. H6a proposed a moderating effect of SMI on the relationship between BP and OBA. The path results showed a significant moderation, B = 0.090, SE = 0.040 and $p < 0.05$. H6a was supported. H6b proposed a moderating effect of SMI on the relationship between brand social benefits and OBA. The path results showed a significant moderation, B = –0.120, SE = 0.057 and $p < 0.05$. H6b was supported.

4 Conclusions

This study, conducted to define the context to OBA, confirms that BW, brand social benefits and BP are main antecedents of OBA. The study argues that the impact of OBA on customer behaviour and attitudes should not be underestimated in this period, where

the concept of the client's journey/path has fully transformed from a loyalty to advocacy perspective. Considered a strong online expression of one's pro-brand views, OBA's ability to influence connected masses is something that should be given full consideration and leveraged upon. Conducted to validate the drivers and consequences of OBA, this study confirms that BW, BD, BP and brand social benefits are key determinants of OBA. Our findings validate the results obtained in the study by Wilk et al. (2020), who pioneered the OBA scale development and identified the key determinants of OBA. Our study also confirmed that SMI moderated the relationship between two brand-antecedents and OBA. Our study argues that in this era, where the definition of the customer's journey/path has completely transformed from loyalty to advocacy perspective, the power of OBA in influencing connected masses is something that should be given complete attention and leveraged upon.

4.1   Discussion

The findings of our study reveal a significant and positive relationship between BW and OBA. In other words, an increase in BW can possibly lead to enhanced OBA. This is something which can be stressed upon by marketers, where they can adopt the necessary strategies to foster BW. For instance, of the ways of augmenting the same is by ensuring improved levels of personalisation of their offerings to make the customer feel special. However, when it comes to personalisation, it is crucial that marketers adopt a balanced approach, where attention to the smallest detail is ensured. Concurrently, they also need to operate within the boundaries as far as the degree of personalisation is concerned, which is important to keep the brand value intact. Another important factor is to add other dimensions to the brands' personality, such as kindness, affability, candour, fervour, etc. which can be key in facilitating OBA.

Another important outcome of our study is the existence of a significant and positive association between BP and OBA. In the context of the same, marketers need to focus on the imperative aspect of customer-brand experiences. Directionally, the essence of brand-related stimuli has a very crucial role to play in ensuring a better brand experience, specifically the role of sensory stimuli is something that needs to be emphasised. In other words, brand managers can leverage the brands' sensory stimuli to improve and effectively enrich the quality of one's experience. However, in their efforts to boost the sensory brand experience, they need to address the issues relating to its volume, exclusivity and uniformity to generate and retain the desired appeal. This in turn will improve the overall quality of the sensory experience and possibly lead to amplified OBA.

The findings of our study also reveal a significant and positive relationship between BD and OBA. At the outset, it is very crucial to understand the difference between brand differentiation and BD. Marketers should have clear goals for brand differentiation, which generally has a more strategic angle to it, powered by strong positioning, ultimately leading to a USP. On the other hand, BD is all about making the brand easily perceptible and unforgettable. This can be achieved through robust and steady branding exercises, which would possibly lead to the development of distinctive brand assets such as tagline, logo, use of words, pictures, etc. We strongly argue that marketers should aim at creating distinctive brand assets and choose the appropriate medium to communicate the same to the intended segment. This can play an important role in improving the overall brand image, foster brand recall and ultimately enhance OBA.

As a significant observation, brands' social benefits also had a noteworthy and affirmative impact on OBA. In this connected world, focusing on the intangible benefits derived from a brand is equally crucial. Consumers' expectations have taken a different form altogether, apart from functional benefits, they expect a brand to have a social dimension to it. Such social benefits can take the form of; providing opportunities for social exchanges, convey the desired cultural meaning and most vitally have a social purpose. In the context of the same, practicing managers can leverage the omni-channel communications to highlight and convey the desired social benefits. At the outset, they should make an attempt to identify the various social needs within the intended target segment and develop meaningful content for communication. However, they need to be careful while designing the campaign in the sense that the message should resonate to the desired level. Offering such social benefits should definitely boost the customer-brand relationship and act as a possible impetus in advancing OBA.

4.2 Managerial implications

Marketers need to understand that online brand advocates are typically volunteers who engage in brand recommendations, out of their love for the brand. They usually engage in telling positive stories about the brand, which comprises of their experiences with the brand. Specifically, these brand advocates contribute their usage experience with products high in technological complexity.

For example, several customers post videos of unique features of a mobile phone, exposing certain features that most customers are unaware of. This is possibly an outcome of their sense of commitment towards a brand, coupled with certain unique characteristics of the product itself. Marketers need to note that many customers viewing these video posts, can utilise the same in their evaluation of brand alternatives, ultimately influencing their purchase decisions. However, several inactive brand advocates also exist in online platforms, they are usually prompted by customer queries or a negative comment by some user, instigates them to reply with a positive response. The experience of such individuals can be leveraged upon by marketers. By providing a better understanding and validation of the OBA concept, this study can assist marketers in the following ways.

At the outset, marketers can focus on identifying such brand advocates and attempt to incentivise them either monetarily or non-monetarily, depending on the nature of the individual. Monetary rewards can include a form of royalty that can be provided to them for their positive content shared on various online platforms. Non-monetary incentives can include, a mention of the individuals' details on the brands' social media and network pages. Both these forms of motivation can aid in the transformation of a brand advocate into an evangelist.

Marketers need to also understand the fact that brand advocates can easily transform into online brand evangelists, who share authentic brand stories and often attract the attention of many prospects. Such evangelists can be leveraged upon by marketers who can convert these individuals into online content contributors. As evangelists have a higher degree of trust, using them in brand storytelling and communications can be an effective way of reaching out to a larger customer base and possible non-users of the brand.

After the successful identification of online brand advocates and evangelists, marketers can also utilise these voluntary brand lovers in developing micro brand

communities, where a pool of opinions can be created. Such micro-communities can also aid in answering the queries of a large number of product users and facilitate subsequent satisfaction and increased brand recommendations. In other words, it can help in creating a complete chain of online brand advocates who can help individuals in gaining social conformity by guiding them in their purchase decisions.

OBA can also be of great help to marketers in improving brand health, vis-à-vis the product portfolio. Brands that are not able to contribute to advertising ROI can be revived or modified, based on the feedback of such brand evangelists. In some cases, brands also suffer as a result of over/under positioning, evangelists can come to the rescue in such situations. Based on their content, posted on various online platforms they can help in repositioning the brand or facilitate the current brand positioning.

The next crucial point on which marketers can focus is, identifying the topics of discussion undertaken by such advocates on various social platforms. This is pivotal because the discussion on a particular topic can lead to subsequent discussions, which can emerge from these topics. Regular discussions on such forums can facilitate brand engagement to a large extent and marketers can find out popular ways by which they can engage with their customers, even in a surrogate manner. Such techniques would be of great help for liquor/beer marketers, who often fight it out in large global markets.

While addressing the notion of brand advocacy, marketers should pay special attention to cultural and sub-cultural values. The impact of culture and sub-cultures on consumer behaviour is quite profound, specifically in the context of brand communications. In the context of using the evangelist in indirect brand communications, marketers need to ensure their substantial cultural appeal for the intended target customers.

Considering the alternations in the consumer journey/path, marketers can deploy an Omni-channel approach to target the customers by providing various touchpoints, thereby shortening the journey. The process from reading an OBA post online to purchasing the product online can be made shorter and more convenient for a prospective customer by multiple touchpoints.

Last but not the least, it is also crucial for marketers to integrate their online and offline marketing efforts to stimulate OBA. They should ensure more on-ground events for new launches or product trials, which can be further utilised to connect both with the offline and online audience and contribute to community development.

The importance of OBA in understanding the effects of showrooming and webrooming is also important for marketers. They need to identify the drivers of such a phenomenon and the extent of online influence exerted on the purchase decision of consumers. Such an understanding could have serious implications for both traditional and online retailers.

4.3   *Theoretical implications and limitations*

The objective of our study was to support the OBA framework by exploring its antecedents, and outlay its ramifications on the PI of consumers. The study contributes to the brand advocacy theory by empirically establishing the antecedents of OBA conceptualisation and its relationship with PI. The study confirms OBA in terms of four underlying dimensions, that is, brand defence, brand positivity, brand information sharing and virtual positive expressions. We have also added to existing theory around OBA by

identifying the moderating effect of SMI on the relationship between BP, brand social benefits and OBA.

However our study is not devoid of limitations, to start-off, our study focused on Gen Z consumers in India. To establish the generalisability of our findings, researchers should replicate the same in the context of other countries, generations, and other online platforms. Future researchers can replicate the study by adopting an experimental research approach, ideally by partnering with online platforms. Research studies in future should consider including a construct that evaluates the implementation of specific technologies on brand recognition.

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