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Online brand advocacy and brand loyalty: A reciprocal relationship?

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Online Brand Advocacy and Brand Loyalty: A reciprocal relationship?

Abstract

Purpose: The study's aim was to increase our understanding of the Online Brand Advocacy (OBA) and brand loyalty relationship through a Social Identity Theory lens.

Design/ methodology/ approach: An online survey was used to obtain the needed data and the relationships of interest were examined using a Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling approach.

Findings: Brand loyalty and consumer-brand identification were found to be predictors of OBA, while OBA impacted on purchase intent. Additionally, a strong reciprocal relationship was found between OBA and brand loyalty, which has not been reported in prior studies.

Research implications: This study highlighted OBA's complexity. It suggested OBA is not only an outcome of a consumer-brand relationship but also that OBA plays a key role in the development of such relationships. A consumer's identification with a brand fosters brand loyalty and purchase intent through the giving of OBA.

Practical implications: The more consumers vocalise their brand relationships through OBA, the more they strengthen their relationship with brands. The inclusion of OBA management in brand and marketing strategies should enable organisations to foster opportunities for online consumer-brand interactions that strengthen consumer-brand relationships.

Originality/ value: Firstly, unlike previous studies that have used makeshift scales to measure OBA, we used a recently developed OBA scale. Secondly, the important reciprocal relationship between OBA and brand loyalty, which has significant implications, has not been reported in prior research.

Keywords: Online Brand Advocacy, brand loyalty, consumer brand identification.

Paper type: Empirical

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Introduction

Online brand advocacy (OBA) is *'strong, influential, purposeful and non-incentivised, online representation of a brand and that brand's best interest by a brand-experienced customer (either past or current), which includes 'standing up for' and speaking on behalf of the brand'* (Wilk, Soutar and Harrigan, 2019, p. 419). It can be seen in a consumer posting on Instagram about a newly built 'Illager Raid' Lego set, giving insights into the intrinsic nature of the build by comparing it to other Lego sets built before and saying they are looking forward to the next episode of Lego Masters. OBA can also be seen in a Facebook post by Celeste Barber (an Australian comedian), who during the 2019-2020 Australian Bushfires disaster, set up a Facebook fundraising campaign for the New South Wales Rural Fire Service and Brigades (https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/), raising over $51 million for the firefighters who fought near her family's rural property. OBA is also apparent in a new mum who experienced many sleepless nights when trying different brands of formula, finally sharing on an online parents' community that she had found a 'miracle potion'.

Consumers' demand for convenience, an increasing internet and mobile device uptake and the current global COVID-19 pandemic have all contributed to the development of a multi-trillion dollar global internet marketplace. Consumers are now shopping at every moment throughout each day, everywhere and anywhere and through many touchpoints (Ibis World, 2020). Sixty seven percent of the world's population has a mobile phone and 60% have access to the internet, which las led communication to become increasingly becoming digital (Hootsuite WeAreSocial Report, October 2020). According to Forbes (Bakhtiari, 2020, online), "the explosion of social media and digital devices in the 21st century has reversed the balance of power." It is now consumers, not brands, which drive the brand narrative online. While only 20% of online consumers trust online advertisements, 92% trust online brand advocates and 75% rely on consumer driven online brand advocacy when making purchase decisions (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020; Hootsuite, 2017). Consequently, OBA is now very powerful and

influential in communicating brand-related information; necessitating a better understanding of the construct.

OBA is different from offline brand advocacy in several ways, as the online context alters brand advocacy's foundations. First, unlike offline brand advocacy, which is typically measured with one or two recommendation items, OBA is multidimensional, having cognitive, affective and virtual visual cues dimensions (Wilk *et al.*, 2018a). Second, OBA has unique online communication aspects (virtual positive expression cues) not found in offline brand advocacy (Wilk *et al.*, 2019). Third, as with most online communication, OBA is highly visible, has unlimited global reach and is permanent (Wilk *et al.*, 2019), whereas offline brand advocacy generally takes place at a specific time (e.g. a face-to-face or a phone conversation) and is directed at one or, at most, a small number, of potential customers (Wilk *et al.*, 2019). Fourth, unlike offline brand advocacy, OBA uses virtual visual expressions (emoticons, emojis, capital lettering and exclamation marks) that enhance the expression of emotion (Riordan, 2017). Fifth, OBA occurs organically in the online environment and is convenient to giver and receiver. Prosumers, who are highly connected and active online, give OBA when networking and socialising (Lawer and Knox, 2006).

Thus, OBA is convenient to give. Similarly, prospective customer searching for brand information receive OBA at any time and on any digital device through multiple digital touchpoints (Tuten and Solomon, 2018). Thus, OBA is convenient to receive. Further, OBA can be received and acted on almost simultaneously, as it often includes selfies with brands, URLs links and material that enables recipients to "verify the information at a click of a button, click through to a brand website and order the advocated brand within seconds of exposure to OBA" (Wilk *et al.*, 2019, p. 417).

Not surprisingly, major brands are trying to nurture OBA. For example, Starbucks' regular #redcupcontest (https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/redcupcontest) enables consumers to share selfies with their red cups of coffee, creating buzz around the brand and fostering OBA. Further, Harley Davidson Owners Group online community (https://www.harley-davidson.com/au/en/owners/hog.html) and Huggies online community (https://www.huggies.com) have created social identities for

their customers, reinforcing consumer-brand identification and instilling a sense of belonging and loyalty. Both brands' online communities are a treasure trove of online spokespeople who give OBA in their online exchanges with each other and prospective customers. Successful companies give their consumers opportunities to be online brand advocates, as they influence prospective consumers, who validate brand-relevant information with brand-experienced online contacts before purchase (Lawer and Knox, 2006). However, there has been little research into OBA, which led to the present study that is discussed in subsequent sections after a review of relevant prior research.

Literature Review

Online Brand Advocacy

Brand advocacy has long been seen as a holy-grail of marketing. Prior research has linked such advocacy to consumer-brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012), satisfaction (Liang and Zhang, 2012), brand loyalty (Munnukka *et al.*, 2014) and purchase intent (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006), suggesting its importance. It occurs when customers spend time and effort to recommend, promote or support a brand (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012) and is a 'discretionary activity' or 'extra-role behaviour' (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Melancon *et al.*, 2011).

OBA is made possible by social media, which has revolutionised marketing, creating an increasingly connected world, in which user generated content (UGC) and online consumer-to-consumer (C2C) communications foster rich brand-related exchanges that influence behaviour (Adjei *et al.*, 2010; Keylock and Faulds, 2012). Consequently, there has been a shift in marketplace power dynamics, with consumers now having more power (Kotler *et al.*, 2017), as today's social media environment is largely consumer controlled (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). Consumers use networking, socialising and communication opportunities on digital platforms, such as online communities, networking sites, blogging sites and online shopping sites, to create brand-related UGC (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010) that consumers value, as they prefer to learn about brands from experienced consumers, as such content is relatable and helps them make informed decisions (Urban, 2005). Consequently, the power to create

authentic brand-related content online is now in the hands of consumers who can be a brand's best advocates (Wilk *et al.*, 2018a, 2019).

Online communication has distinct characteristics, as it is often anonymous, directed to many people and available to consumers for an indefinite period (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004). It also enables expression through emojis and emoticons that takes online communication beyond textual discourses (dos Reis *et al.*, 2018; Arya *et al.*, 2018). Further, online communication has "unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion" (Cheung and Thadani, 2012, p. 462) and involves multi-way exchanges of information in an asynchronous mode. However, OBA has been inconsistently and interchangeably operationalized, creating confusion (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2012; Keylock and Faulds, 2012). Recent research has suggested OBA is an elaborate construct related to offline brand advocacy but with distinct online communication traits given by brand-experienced consumers (Wilk *et al.*, 2019). Four dimensions have been suggested, namely:

- Brand knowledge, which is seen in in-depth, intimate, intricate and insightful brand information and details that only brand-experienced consumers can provide.

- Brand defence, which involves 'standing up for', 'speaking on behalf of', 'defending', speaking in a brand's best interest or negating negative brand-information online in a way that reflects brand-protective behaviour.

- Brand positivity, which involves positive and favourable communication about a brand and the endorsement of that brand.

- Positive virtual visual cues, which are virtual visual manifestations that support a brand and visual online expressions that indicate favourable feelings about a brand. Such cues include emojis, emoticons, lettering (exclamation marks, bold typeface) and brand photos in situ (Wilk *et al.*, 2019).

It is unclear what motivates people to give OBA in online contexts and whether OBA improves brand loyalty and purchase intent, as only makeshift OBA scales have been used previously (e.g. Divol *et al.*, 2012; Wallace *et al.*, 2012). Wilk *et al.*'s (2019) research suggested some initial insights into OBA's relationship with brand loyalty and purchase intent However, more research is needed to determine its antecedents and outcomes.

Differences between OBA and e-WOM and CBE

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and consumer-brand engagement (CBE) are not OBA. Unlike CBE and eWOM (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Chu and Kim, 2011), OBA is a reflection of a consumer-brand relationship, as the brand is integrated into the advocate's life (Wilk *et al.*, 2018a). It is not an unjustified, simple recommendation, hear-say or the online relaying of brand information; characteristics often attributed to eWOM (e.g. Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). It has a depth of conviction and in-depth knowledge is shared based on customers' own experiences with a brand. It also includes standing up for a brand online, which distinguishes it from eWOM.

Unlike CBE, an OBA post is *not* an engagement *with* a brand; rather, it translates previous engagement with a brand (e.g. consumer-brand interaction) into behaviour (online favourable communication with other consumers *about* the brand). Consequently, OBA is a behavioural portrayal of CBE online that is purposeful (an endorsement, in the brand's best interest), elaborate (brand-information-rich and affection-rich) and impactful (is acted upon by recipients); characteristics that distinguish it from CBE and eWOM (Wilk *et al.*, 2019, 2018a).

A reciprocal relationship between OBA and brand loyalty

Consumer-brand relationships are complex. Consumers who identify with a brand are more likely to be brand loyal and to spend time on 'discretionary' or 'extra-role behaviours', such as recommending a brand or helping others with brand-related queries (Popp and Woratschek, 2017; Melancon *et al.*, 2011; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). The brand loyalty-brand advocacy (one-way) relationship in offline contexts has been well documented (e.g.: Coelho *et al.*, 2019; Munnukka *et al.*, 2014). However, it has not been

well investigated in online contexts, as OBA has only recently been operationalised, defined and measured (Wilk *et al.*, 2019). Further, no prior research has investigated whether brand advocacy leads to brand loyalty, in offline or online settings. This is curious as, in online contexts, consumers are vocal about brands and do not shy away from "social media consumption, contribution, and creation of brand-related content (COBRAs)" (Schivinski *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). It may be that, the more a consumer shares and vocalises about a brand, the more they become attached to that brand, suggesting this relationship should also be examined.

Theoretically, it is possible to draw on Brand Attachment Theory (i.e. the more consumers advocate for a brand online, the more attached and loyal they become) to support a reciprocal relationship between brand advocacy and brand loyalty, where brand advocacy helps build deeper customer-brand relationships (Lawer and Knox, 2006; Park *et al.*, 2010; Malär *et al.*, 2011). It is also possible to draw on Social Exchange Theory (Yan *et al.*, 2016; Zheng *et al.*, 2015), where it is clear that social behaviour involves an exchange where resources *"continue to flow only if there is a valued return"* (Emerson, 1976, p. 359).

Social identity theory

Social identity theory (SIT) was seen as a useful lens for this study, as it has helped researchers better understand online behaviour (Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). The theory suggests people's self-concepts have individual and social aspects (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) that are reinforced by their identification with social referents, such as organisations or brands (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and by experiencing their successes and failures as one's own (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). O'Connor *et al.* (2015) suggested such identification can be seen online when consumers who identify with a brand have a sense of online community and derive a social identity from this. For example, Harley Davidson owners derive a strong social identity from not only owning a Harley Davidson motorcycle but also from belonging to the HOGs (the Harley Davidson Owners' Group, which is an online community) (https://www.harley-davidson.com/au/en/content/hog.html). Such an identification can be seen in a strong affiliation for the brand and in online brand-relevant exchanges between consumers (HOG members).

Notably, the theory is as relevant in online contexts as it is in offline contexts (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*'s (2012) and Fazli-Salehi *et al.*'s (2019) investigation into CBI is extended in this paper by looking into the relationships between CBI, brand loyalty, purchase intent and OBA, as it was felt consumers' identification with a brand suggests a bond that might offer insights into the OBA-brand loyalty nexus. For example, Stokburger-Sauer *et al.* (2012) found CBI results in an intent to advocate for a brand and in brand loyalty, which has been supported by Fazli-Salehi *et al.*'s (2019) research, suggesting consumers who identify with a brand are actively engaged with that brand. Consequently, SIT presents a suitable lens through which OBA might be further explored.

The study's framework

Consumer-Brand Identification

CBI is a consumer's *'perceived state of oneness with a brand'* (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012, p. 407) and a *'psychological state of perceiving, feeling and valuing his or her belongingness to a brand'* (Lam *et al.*, 2010, p. 130). CBI sits within Social Identity Theory (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006), as people can use brands to define who they are (private self) and to consider themselves part of an in-group who identify with the brand (social self). Strong identification with a 'social referent', such as an online brand community, leads to behaviours that support the group's interests (O'Connor *et al.*, 2015). Such actions are fostered through CBI, as consumers feel they belong to a brand, its community or some other brand-related referent. The stronger the link between a brand, consumer and brand community, the more likely it is that a consumer will perform loyalty actions, such as advocacy (Sanz-Blas, Buzova and Perez-Ruiz, 2020).

CBI stimulates favourable brand outcomes, such as undertaking positive and cooperative behaviours (Badrinarayanan and Laverie, 2011), expending significant effort supporting the brand, increasing brand commitment (Tuškej *et al.*, 2011) and resisting brand switching (Lam *et al.* 2010). Indeed, prior offline research (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2019; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Lam *et al.*, 2010) found people

who identified with a brand were more likely to be loyal and advocate for the brand. These consumer-brand relationships are likely to transfer to online contexts, suggesting:

H1: CBI is positively related to OBA.

H2: CBI is positively related to brand loyalty.

Opinion leaders (such as OBA givers) are also opinion seekers (i.e. OBA receivers) (Sun *et al.*, 2006). Online settings are particular in the way people interact with each other and content. Online participation is such that 'sender' and 'receiver' roles are not mutually exclusive (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Those who participate online are often 'senders' and 'receivers'. Echoing prior research that investigated recipients' intent to purchase (e.g. Keller, 2007), it is likely OBA givers can provide insights into their past purchases of the brands for which they advocate and insights into their intention to purchase advocated brands. Further, SIT suggests consumer's identification with a brand and, hence, with its online community, may foster purchase intent through the giving of OBA. Thus, the more a consumer vocalizes their brand relationships, the more they are a spokesperson for the brand and its online community, reinforcing their relationship with that brand and their repeat purchase behaviour (Sanz-Blas, Buzova and Perez-Ruiz, 2020). Thus, providing OBA is likely to increase the likelihood of future purchases, suggesting:

H3: OBA is positively related to intentions to purchase that brand.

Brands strive for loyal customers, as loyalty has marketing and financial advantages, such as reduced costs, wider reach and new customers (Aaker and Biel, 1993). Brand loyalty is a *'biased (non-random), behavioural response expressed over time by some decision making unit, with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands'*, underpinned by a commitment to the brand (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973, p. 2). Brand loyalty evidences the intense and galvanised relationship between a consumer and a brand, and such a quality relationship reflects a partnership between the two parties (Lawer and Knox, 2006). A loyal consumer-brand relationship is typically exemplified by trust, affection and support, such as that given by the consumer of a brand. Notably, brand loyalty seems to propel the

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consumer to showcase their loyalty to the brand and support the brand by vocalising their relationship with the brand to others, by giving brand advocacy (e.g. Coelho, Bairrada, and Peres, 2019; Munnukka *et al.*, 2014). Supporting the brand in this way is helpful for the brand as it positions the brand in a positive light to prospective consumers (Coelho, Bairrada, and Peres, 2019). Recent studies have found that a self-brand connection motivates brand loyal consumers to do support the brand in this way (e.g. Eelen, Özturan, and Verlegh, 2017). These studies provide the foundations to suggest that in online settings:

H4: Brand loyalty is positively related to OBA.

Offline research has found a strong, positive relationship between brand loyalty and purchase intent (e.g. Porral and Lang, 2015), and in the e-commerce context, e-loyalty and purchase intent were also linked (e.g. Morales-Solana, Cotas, and Esteban-Millat, 2019), while consumer-to-consumer communication within online communities has been found to have a positive impact on purchase intention (Adjei *et al.*, 2010; Keylock and Faulds, 2012). Notably, loyal customers connected to and supportive of the brand are more likely to support the relationship by re-purchasing the brand in order to continue their consumer-brand relationship, suggesting that online:

H5: Brand loyalty is positively related to intention to purchase that brand.

Finally, there has been a suggestion that the relationship between brand advocacy and brand loyalty may be reciprocal, as brand advocacy helps build deeper customer-brand relationships (Lawer and Knox, 2006), which stems from Brand Attachment Theory (Park *et al.*, 2010; Malär *et al.*, 2011). As online communications are underpinned by the social exchange of knowledge and support, OBA can be further explained by Social Exchange Theory (Yan *et al.*, 2016; Zheng *et al.*, 2015), suggesting social behaviour requires mutually-beneficial exchanges (Emerson, 1976). In OBA's case, the valued return may take several forms (e.g., responses to online posts by recipients, such as members of an online community, the forwarding or sharing of information online and purchase behaviour). Thus, the more an OBA giver (advocate) receives a 'valued return' from recipients (e.g. likes, follows or online comments), the more the advocate bonds with the brand, hastening the formation of a consumer-brand

relationship. SIT suggests consumer's identification with a brand and, hence, with its online community may foster brand loyalty through the giving of OBA. Thus, the more a consumer vocalizes their brand relationships, the more they are a spokesperson for the brand and its online community, reinforcing their relationship with that brand, suggesting:

> *H6: OBA is positively related to brand loyalty.*

The hypotheses led to the model shown in Figure 1 that was examined in this study, which is discussed in the next section.

Figure 1 about here

The Study

The online survey

A questionnaire that included Wilk *et al.*'s (2019) OBA scale and items that measured the other constructs of interest was sent to members of an online Australian research panel. Following the critical incident technique (Gremler, 2004), respondents were asked to: *'Think of a time when you had a positive experience with a brand and how you reacted to this experience in your online communications with others.'* They were asked to name the brand, which was placed in questions asked in the survey, allowing the questionnaire to be personalised for each respondent. People who could not identify a brand were excluded. Respondents indicated their agreement with each of the items on a seven-point Likert-type scale. Given the length of the questionnaire, an item that checked respondents' attention (*'If you are reading this statement, please click 'strongly agree''*) was included. Respondents who did not answer this item correctly were removed. The questionnaire, was pre-tested on a small sample (78), allowing minor changes to be made before the full data set was collected.

The sample

Four hundred and forty five (445) complete responses were obtained. Within the responses, a wide variety of brands of goods and services were named, including electronic products (30%), fashion (11%), retail

(9%), grocery (9%), personal care (7%) and others (banking, healthcare, insurance, cars, restaurants, hotels, airlines and telecommunication providers). Fifty eight percent of respondents were female, while 10% were aged between 18 and 24, 20% were aged between 25 and 34, 19% were aged between 35 and 44, 16% were aged between 45 and 54, 17% were aged between 55 and 64, 16% were aged between 65 and 75 and the rest were 76 or older. The largest group of respondents were professionals (41%), while 28% had an undergraduate degree and 27% had a TAFE qualification. Household income before tax was almost equally spread throughout the income categories (from $25,000 to $149,999), with 19% respondents having incomes in the $25,001 to $49,999 range and in the $100,000 to $149,999 range.

The constructs' measurement properties

The constructs' measurement properties were initially assessed, to ensure the model could be properly estimated. The constructs, including the four OBA sub-dimensions, were initially examined to ensure they were reliable and had convergent and discriminant validity using the WarpPLS 7.0 program (Kock, 2020). All of the items related well to their constructs, as loadings were greater than 0.60, which was expected, as all were well-established scales with the exception of the OBA scale, which had been developed recently. However, three of the brand loyalty items unexpectedly also loaded onto the purchase intent construct. These items were removed prior to continuing, after testing that their removal did not alter the constructs' meanings by computing the correlation between the original and the reduced construct (Thomas *et al.*, 2001). The correlation was 0.96, suggesting the brand loyalty construct was not altered by removing these items.

The number of items in each scale and the scales' means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. The highest means were for OBA Positivity (6.06) and Purchase Intent (6.02), while the lowest mean was for OBA Virtual Positive Expression (4.21), suggesting respondents rated the constructs favourably, which was not surprising, as they were reflecting on positive brand interactions. The standard deviations were highest for OBA Virtual Positive Expression (1.91) and lowest for OBA Positivity (1.05) and Purchase Intent (1.06). There was sufficient variation to suggest further analysis would be worthwhile.

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Internal consistency was assessed by computing Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients (Table 1). All constructs were reliable, with alpha coefficients ranging upwards from 0.82, while the CR coefficients ranged upward from 0.88. As all exceeded the suggested minimum of 0.70 (Kock, 2015) by a considerable margin, all were considered reliable. Convergent validity was assessed by computing AVE scores. Fornell and Larcker (1981) argued an AVE score of 0.50 or more implied there was more information than noise in the construct, suggesting convergent validity. The AVE scores (Table 1) ranged from 0.65 (Brand Loyalty) to 0.89 (OBA (Virtual Expression)). Clearly all were considerably higher than the recommended minimum, suggesting they had convergent validity.

Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested discriminant validity could be assumed between two constructs if the square root of their AVE scores were greater than the correlation between them. All of the construct pairs met this requirement, as the highest correlation was 0.74, while the lowest square root of the AVE scores was 0.80. Further, all of the full collinearity VIF scores were less than 3.3 (Kock, 2020). Finally, all of the constructs had HTMT ratios less than 0.90 (Henseler *et al*., 2015). Thus, discriminant validity could be assumed for all of the constructs. While some have suggested common method bias is an 'urban legend' (Spector, 2006, p. 222), others have expressed concern about its impact (e.g. Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, it should be assessed. Kock (2015) suggested using full collinearity VIF scores, arguing that, if these scores are less than 3.3, such bias is not likely to be an issue. Here, only one construct had a VIF score greater than 3.3 (OBA Defence) and this was only 3.55, suggesting common method bias was not an issue.

Insert Table 1 about here

Estimating the Model

The robustness of PLS procedures and, in particular, their ability to deal with non-normal data and their use of a bootstrapping approach, as well as their fewer restrictions (Manley et al., 2020), suggested they would be a useful way to estimate the suggested model (Chin, 2010). Further, the model being estimated would not be potentially identified if a CB-SEM approach was used (Hess, 2001), suggesting a PLS approach was likely to be more appropriate. Finally, the suggested reciprocal relationship between OBA

and brand loyalty could be modelled using the instrumental variables approach developed by Kock (2020) within the WarpPLS program. OBA was modelled here as a second-order formative construct in which each of the primary sub-dimensions was included as an indicator of the second-order construct (Coltman *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, a formative approach was used, as it was not clear that the sub-dimensions were 'caused' by the same antecedents (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). As there was a formative endogenous construct (OBA), the PLS regression approach was used to estimate the model, as this ensured the inner and outer model coefficients did not influence one another (Kock, 2020).

The model was estimated using the WarpPLS 7.0 program. The estimated standardised path coefficients, which can be seen in the third column of Table 2, provided strong support for all of the hypothesised paths, as all were positive (as suggested) and significant well beyond the 0.001 level. Interestingly, the strongest relationships were between CBI and brand loyalty (0.66), brand loyalty and purchase intent (0.59) and CBI and OBA (0.49), but all were significant and all had at least a medium effect size (Kock, 2020). It was also apparent CBI was an important antecedent to brand loyalty and OBA, as it explained more than 40% of the variation in these constructs (43% and 63% respectively). Further, the model explained 57% of the variation in purchase intention. Thus, all of the endogenous constructs were well explained.

Insert Table 2 about here

As the model suggested OBA and brand loyalty were mediators, this issue was also examined. Following Kock's (2014) suggestion, the indirect paths were all assessed and found to be significant well beyond the 0.01 level, suggesting mediation was present. Consequently, the variance accounted for (VAF) approach suggested by Hair *et al.* (2014) was used to assess the nature of the mediation affect. The VAF score is the proportion of the total effect of a construct due to indirect effects (i.e. the mediated effects). If a VAF score is greater than 80 (i.e. more than 80% of the total effect is attributable to indirect relationships), full mediation can be assumed. While, if the VAF is less than 20 (i.e. less than 20% of the total effect is attributable to indirect relationships), no mediation should be assumed. When

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CBI's direct effect on purchase intent was included, it was not significant; suggesting full mediation, a conclusion supported when VAF scores were calculated as both were above 0.80 (0.93 and 0.81 respectively). Further, while both mediations were significant at the 1% level, the mediation through brand loyalty was greater than through OBA, as the indirect impact through brand loyalty was 0.56, while the indirect effect through OBA was 0.07.

The model was re-estimated to examine the suggested reciprocal relationship between OBA and brand loyalty. This can be done in WarpPLS through the use of instrumental variables that first correct for potential endogeneity and then estimate reciprocal effects (Kock, 2020). An additional separate predictor was added to loyalty (age) and to OBA (gender) to ensure the model was identified when the instrumental variables were included. When this was done, the reciprocal effects were significant well beyond the 0.001 level and almost equally strong, as brand loyalty's effect on OBA was 0.43, while OBA's effect on brand loyalty was 0.39. Further, there was an increase in the R^2 statistics for both constructs (0.67 for loyalty and 0.64 for OBA). Thus, it seems wise to model this reciprocal relationship when examining OBA.

Discussion

CBI and brand loyalty were good predictors of OBA and there was a significant reciprocal relationship between OBA and brand loyalty, highlighting the complexity of consumer-brand relationships. This study is the first to show consumers who identify with a brand are more likely to be brand loyal and to spend time *online* on 'discretionary' or 'extra-role behaviours' (OBA). Previously, this had only been shown in offline research (e.g. Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Melancon *et al.*, 2011). OBA, in turn, had a strong impact on brand loyalty and purchase intent, suggesting it is a powerful mechanism that precedes and reinforces consumer-brand relationships.

The relationship between CBI and OBA

The fact that CBI is a key driver of OBA suggests brand identification is important. CBI is a strong predictor of brand advocacy intentions offline (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2019; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012), as well as OBA here and these results echo other studies that found a positive relationship between CBI and positive brand communication (e.g. Tuškej *et al.*, 2011). It seems consumers who identify with a brand are stronger supporters of that brand offline and online, a point this study was the first to show.

The relationship between OBA and brand loyalty

The relationship between OBA and brand loyalty is multifaceted. Brand loyalty was a strong predictor of OBA, suggesting the more loyal consumers are to a brand, the more they are inclined to give OBA. OBA has relational worth elements (Melancon *et al.*, 2011) and, in online contexts, may be seen as an online vehicle through which loyal customers can present a brand's best interests by speaking favourably on behalf of that brand to other (potential) customers. These findings are consistent with prior offline studies (e.g. Machado, *et al.*, 2014; Casaló *et al.*, 2008). Thus, there seems to be a positive relationship between brand advocacy and brand loyalty regardless of the context in which it occurs.

Secondly, and importantly, the relationship between OBA and brand loyalty was reciprocal. This was an unexpected finding that highlights OBA's complexity. OBA's impact on brand loyalty suggests publicly verbalizing and showing a consumer-brand relationship through OBA leads advocates to become more connected and, as a result, more loyal to a brand. OBA enhances people's self-representation online, strengthening their loyalty to that brand (Park *et al.*, 2010; Malär *et al.*, 2011). The fact OBA is not only an outcome of a consumer-brand relationship (e.g. brand loyalty) but also plays a role in the formation of such relationships, is of particular importance and a key contribution.

The relationship between OBA and purchase intent

Although consumers' online behaviour is complex, OBA was a strong predictor of purchase intent. This echoes prior studies that found repurchase is driven by people's psychological 'bond' with a brand (Keller and Lehmann, 2006) and this creates a commitment to repurchase (Oliver, 1999). These results

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support John *et al.*'s (2017) suggestion that brand attitudes and purchase are impacted by consumers' fondness for a brand and that these relationships are the same regardless of when and whether consumers 'liked' brands on social media. The results also support previous research into online communications and their influence (Adjei *et al.*, 2010; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Keylock and Faulds, 2012).

Theoretical implications

OBA is a new construct that has only recently been operationalised and measured (see Wilk *et al.*, 2019; Wilk *et al.,* 2018a). This paper is the first to explore the OBA-brand loyalty nexus that is fundamental to understanding consumer-brand relationships. Previous OBA studies (e.g. Wallace *et al.*, 2014) used makeshift scales based on word-of-mouth (WOM) items, which is not ideal. A novel contribution of this paper is the reciprocal relationship found between OBA and brand loyalty, which has not been reported online or offline. This is significant, as it suggests consumer-brand relationships are not stagnant and that consumers need to be encouraged to keep talking about the brand (advocating) to maintain brand loyalty.

The study used social identity theory (SIT) and built on previous work by Stokburger-Sauer *et al.* (2012), Fazli-Salehi *et al.* (2019) and Sanz-Blas, Buzova and Perez-Ruiz (2020). This study has shown that consumer's identification with a brand fosters brand loyalty and purchase intent through the giving of OBA; which has not been shown before. Thus, the more a consumer vocalizes their brand relationship through OBA, the more they strengthen their relationship with the brand.

This research provided further validation of the OBA construct and suggests online consumer-brand relationships are complex. This complexity, and the ever-changing digital communications landscape, means much work is needed to better understand OBA. Consumer-brand relationships, specifically CBI and brand loyalty, play important roles in the development of OBA. Undeniably, CBI is a key OBA motivator, suggesting consumers who identify with a brand will be its strongest advocates online. This, in itself, is an important finding that enhances Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*'s (2012) CBI model.

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Interestingly, OBA is not only an outcome of consumer-brand relationships but also a driver of such relationships.

Managerial implications

In the current changing digital marketing environment, where social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are trailing the removal of heuristics such as 'Likes' and the number of views (metrics typically associated with a brand's online success) (Bogle, 2019; Derwin, 2019), consumers are driven to engage in online content in other, arguably, more meaningful ways (e.g. by commenting and participating in online discussions). Consequently, brands are turning their attention to understanding consumer-driven communication, such as OBA. As brands are continuously assessed not only by prospective consumers but also by global consumer watchdog groups and product rating organisations, identifying digital media strategies that protect and grow a brand is vital to their long-term success (Benthaus, *et al.*, 2016). OBA presents a way to do this. Kirby and Marsden (2006, p. 57) argued 'brand advocacy drives brand growth' and this is evident in online contexts. OBA is a mechanism through which organisations can fast-track consumer purchase-decision making processes, from receiving OBA to forming an intent to purchase. As OBA strengthens brand loyalty, its significance to customer relationship management strategies should not be underestimated.

OBA is also a crucial part of bottom-of-the-funnel tactics designed to retain consumers and close the brand loyalty loop that nurtures long-term consumer-brand relationships (Court *et al.*, 2009). Brands wishing to foster OBA need to create opportunities for consumers to share about their brand online, as it is during online brand conversations that OBA arises, fostering brand loyalty and purchase intent. Organisations need to create and support online communities and forums, be they brand managed (e.g. my.playstation.com) or consumer managed (e.g. sk-gaming.com, which is a professional e-sports organisation that has teams across the world competing in different titles such as League of Legends or Hearthstone). Such online forum discussion opportunities support consumers' identification with a brand and improve loyalty; both of which lead to OBA.

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An example of a brand that excels in creating such opportunities is ASOS, an online fashion outlet (www.asos.com). Their online #asseenonme campaign encourages customers to share their experiences and has become an ongoing digital marketing content strategy that reinforces consumer-brand identification and encourages OBA. The approach allows ASOS's consumers to galvanize their identification with the brand by feeling they are part of the brand; fostering long-term consumer-brand relationships (a bottom-of-the-funnel tactic) and allowing them to be the brand voice's through OBA (a top-of-the-funnel tactic). ASOS leverages such posts by including descriptions and product numbers, making it easy for social media users (prospective consumers) to find and buy the products featured in OBA (a middle-of-funnel tactic). ASOS uses OBA to support a holistic digital marketing strategy that supports customers' decision-making journeys, from top-of-funnel awareness, through middle-of-funnel conversions, to bottom-of-funnel loyalty and advocacy.

Brand managers and marketers need to foster OBA by listening to and monitoring digital channels for OBA; and by doing so, initiate and participate in online community discussions which involve OBA. Brand should also encourage and use social proof, such as customer stories through reviews, ratings and testimonials, in order to foster OBA and OBA's reach.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research into OBA and its reciprocal relationship with brand loyalty, is encouraged. Specifically, the conditions that contribute to OBA's role as an antecedent to the formation of consumer-brand relationships, should be investigated. Such studies may further expand the SIT theory based OBA model presented in this paper or look into other theoretical frameworks to better understand OBA. Notably, OBA occurs in the process of online communication between social media users who exchange brand-related knowledge, brand positivity and brand support. As a result, OBA can also be explained by Social Exchange Theory (Yan *et al.*, 2016; Zheng *et al.*, 2015; Emerson, 1976). Thus, researchers can extend the suggested OBA model by examining how social exchanges might further explain the OBA and brand loyalty nexus, as well as OBA's relationship with other constructs (e.g. self-brand attachment, brand love and perceived value).

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As this study is based on responses from an online research panel, future studies are encouraged to include qualitative methodologies, such as interviews with online brand advocates or observations of actual online exchanges, to present new insights into this construct.

Conclusions

OBA's influence on behaviour and attitudes should not be underestimated. It is a powerful, online expression of customer-driven influence and it is an OBA post's totality of message through verbal and non-verbal, virtual communication cues that affects pro-brand outcomes (e.g. Adjei *et al.*, 2010). OBA's reciprocal relationship with brand loyalty provides new insights into consumer-brand relationships in our digital age. With the digital revolution driving consumers' communication and behaviours from offline to online settings (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2019) and the limited research into brand advocacy online (Parrott *et al.*, 2015; Graham and Havlena, 2007; Divol, *et al.*, 2012), this study answered the call to undertake research that lets us better understand OBA.

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Figure 1: A suggested OBA Model.

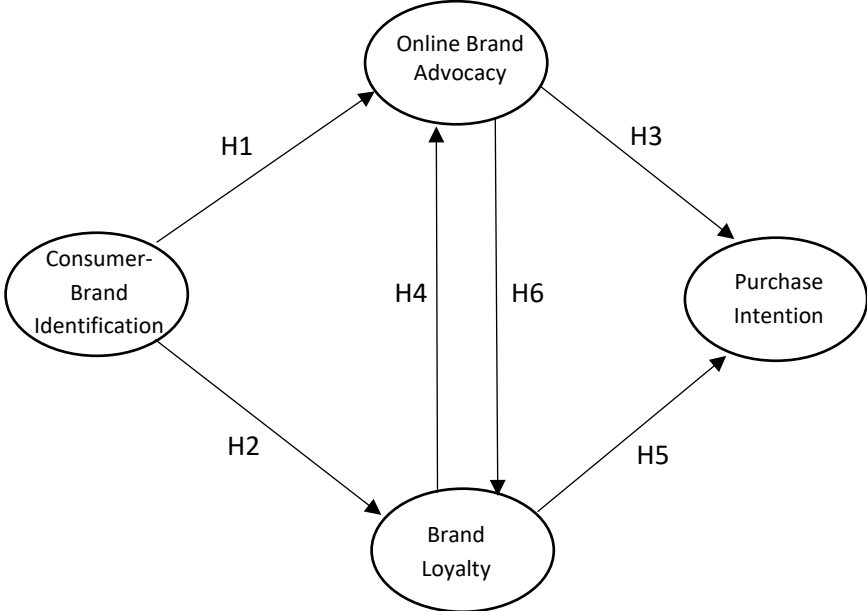Table 1: The Constructs' Descriptive Statistics and Measurement Properties

Construct	# items	Mean	SD	Alpha	CR	AVE Score	Full Collinearity VIF
Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI)	5	4.83	1.54	0.94	0.95	0.80	2.71
Brand Loyalty (BLT)	4	5.09	1.33	0.82	0.88	0.65	3.09
Purchase Intent (PI)	7	6.02	1.06	0.94	0.95	0.74	3.15
Online Brand Advocacy (Positivity) (OBAP)	4	6.06	1.05	0.90	0.93	0.77	2.36
Online Brand Advocacy (Knowledge) (OBAK)	4	4.32	1.53	0.85	0.90	0.69	2.97
Online Brand Advocacy (Virtual Expression) (OBAVE)	3	4.21	1.91	0.94	0.96	0.89	2.08
Online Brand Advocacy (Defence) (OBAD)	5	4.76	1.53	0.94	0.95	0.80	3.55

Table 2: The Estimated Relationships

Hypothesis	Estimate	Path Coefficient (β)	p-value	Hypothesis	Effect size (f^2)
H1	CBI - OBA	0.49	<0.001	Accepted	0.36
H2	CBI - BLT	0.66	<0.001	Accepted	0.43
H3	OBA - PI	0.21	<0.001	Accepted	0.13
H4	BLT - OBA	0.38	<0.001	Accepted	0.27
H5	BLT - PI	0.59	<0.001	Accepted	0.44

H1	CBI - OBA	0.49	<0.001	Accepted	0.36
H2	CBI - BLT	0.66	<0.001	Accepted	0.43