

**Destination brand attachment: Understanding the path towards loyalty and advocacy**

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**Abstract**

Building on attachment theory, this paper investigates the role of consumers' destination brand attachment (DBAT) and self-brand connection (SBC) in building behavioral outcomes namely destination brand loyalty and advocacy towards eco-destination brands. In addition, the study also investigates the mediating role of destination brand image. The study adopts a quantitative approach by using survey to collect data from 240 eco-tourists. The proposed hypotheses were examined with PLS-SEM. The results reveal that DBI partially mediates the relationship between DBAT and DBL, as well as SBC and DBL. Furthermore, DBI fully mediates the relationships between DBAT and DBA, and SBC and DBA. The findings have practical implications for destination managers and eco-tourism businesses. They can develop marketing campaigns to strengthen the consumer's attachment and self-brand connection with eco-tourism sites. Destination brand managers can build a positive destination brand image. These efforts will improve consumers' loyalty and encourage advocacy for eco-destinations.

**Keywords:** Attachment theory, destination brand attachment, self-brand connection, destination brand image, destination brand advocacy, destination brand loyalty.

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the acknowledgment of ecotourism as a feasible and sustainable method of tourism. This kind of tourism prioritizes the conservation of natural habitats and support for local communities (Zhu et al., 2022). This entails exploring undisturbed natural landscapes and participating in activities that prioritize environmental education, conservation efforts, and cultural integration (Liburd et al., 2021). Ecotourism has been widely promoted as a pleasurable and peaceful holiday that also protects the local ecosystem. Ecotourism generates significant income, with 35% of tourists spending on ecotourism holidays (Global Data (2016). Malaysia (76%) is most interested in ecotourism, followed by China (67%) and Turkey (65%)(Go et al., 2020). The sector earned \$181.1 billion in 2019 and is expected to reach \$333.8 billion by 2027, growing 14.3% annually. Ecotourism accounts for 10% of the global GDP, 10% of global employment, and 7% of the international tourist market. We must realise that 33% of all tourism is ecotourism (Mengkebayaer et al., 2022). In order to strengthen the nation's eco-tourism, more knowledge and new strategies are needed.

Despite the increased interest in destination branding in the literature on marketing and tourism (Centeno & Mandagi, 2022), there is a pressing need for rigorous studies in eco-destination branding. Kumar & Kaushik, (2017) highlighted the need for more comprehensive studies on

destination branding in general. Destination brands are the names, symbols, logos, words, or other graphics that identify and distinguish a destination; additionally, they communicate the assurance of a memorable travel experience uniquely linked to the destination; they also function to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of enjoyable memories associated with the destination experience are novel to the travel and tourism sector (Morrison, 2023; Rather et al., 2021).

Destination branding is a crucial aspect of marketing strategies and the most significant marketing tool in the tourism sector. It shapes the image of places in the minds of potential tourists and other stakeholders, highlighting the exclusivity of these locations. Tourist destinations worldwide have begun to make their locations more recognizable to attract tourists, new residents, investors, and other stakeholders (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). For instance, New York and Amsterdam, known as "crime city" and "sin city" respectively, successfully changed their reputations through branding (Cazorla, 2018). Amsterdam earned over \$90 million in tourism revenue as a result of its branding campaign in 2019 (CNN Travel, 2019). Similarly, New York saw over 65 million visitors in 2018 (New York Times, 2019). Based on these figures, it can be concluded that a destination's brand image significantly affects tourism receipts (Ali et al., 2023).

Destinations establish emotional connections with travelers and create brand value in the competitive world of today's tourism brand marketing. To achieve this, tourism strategies should connect tourists' emotions and feelings to the destination's unique features, such as stunning scenery, historical landmarks, environmentally conscious locals, and cultural and religious values (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). This emotional connection and the bonding they create with a destination is called destination brand attachment (Huang et al., 2017). Cultural and social values, along with fundamental beliefs, foster a certain kind of relationship between the destination brand and its visitors. The self-congruence theory is reflected in the sense of a person's self-connection with the brand, which helps to explain why consumers prefer to consume companies that emotionally and personally align with them (Arya et al., 2018).

Positive destination branding can boost visitation rates, revenues, and customer loyalty, which frequently results in advocates (Pickton & Masterson, 2010). Destination brand advocacy refers to the degree to which a customer actively promotes a destination by generating positive word-of-mouth and raising awareness of it (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018). Previous studies have examined various antecedents of destination brand loyalty and advocacy, such as destination brand identification and brand engagement (Chen et al., 2020; Kumar & Kaushik, 2017), destination image and satisfaction (Kusdibyo, 2022; Saini & Arasanmi, 2021), destination competitiveness and tourist trust (Tassawa & Banjongprasert, 2019), psychological engagement (Quoquab et al., 2021), and destination brand experience (Srivastava et al., 2022). According to Xu et al. (2021), destination brand attachment and self-brand connection are crucial factors in tourists' advocacy and loyalty to eco-destination brands. In this study, we aim to explore the impact of destination brand attachment and self-brand connection on eco-tourists' brand loyalty and advocacy, as well as the mediating effect of destination brand image.

Our study aims to develop and test a theoretical framework of destination branding, which builds on the existing literature on destination brand attachment, self-brand connection, destination brand image, destination brand loyalty, and destination brand advocacy. The study intends to address the gaps in the literature in three ways. First, it aims to incorporate the concept of destination attachment into the existing concepts of branding. While scholars have encouraged the inclusion of concepts like place attachment (Jiang et al., 2017) limited attention has been given to the study of destination attachment. Second, our study emphasizes destination brand attachment and self-brand connection as the key antecedents of destination brand loyalty and advocacy, mediated by

destination brand image. Examining these relationships could provide valuable insights to ecotourism managers and stakeholders, enabling them to enhance the eco-destination image in the minds of consumers through the provision of superior tourism and hospitality services. This, in turn, can lead to stronger connections between tourists and destination brands, fostering loyalty and advocacy.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: the theoretical background and hypothesis; methodology; analysis; discussion and conclusion.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Attachment theory**

Attachment theory originated from the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis and is rooted in the examination of the parent-child relationship. The principal attachment or parental figure holds a distinctive value and is not readily substitutable in this capacity. The initial attachment experienced by an individual during infancy plays a significant role in shaping their cognitive representation of self and the subsequent development of interpersonal bonds, which persist throughout adulthood (Krolikowska et al., 2020). Attachment theory, initially introduced by Bowlby (1979, 1982, 1988), has subsequently undergone extensive scholarly elaboration. In the context of this theoretical framework, the concept of attachment pertains to the initial establishment of emotional and psychological connections between individuals (Tsai, 2012). The concept of destination attachment is becoming more and more common in the field of tourism research. Destination attachment is the term for a favorable link or tie that develops between a person and a specific destination, which has its roots in attachment theory (Dwyer et al., 2019).

Attachment theory helps analyze self-brand and emotional brand attachment. Brands become extensions of consumers when they create emotional connections. Meaning and fulfillment drive this bond. Self-brand connection, however, aligns customers' self-image with the company's. Tourism requires emotional and self-brand attachment. Tourists bond with destination companies through good recollections. These attachments increase advocacy for, adherence to, and word-of-mouth about destinations. Selecting brands that go together with travel tastes and identities also results in a self-brand connection. Attachment theory shapes destination brand image. Emotional and self-brand connections affect consumer brand impressions. Strong ties create positive destination brand image associations, which boost consumer loyalty and advocacy (Shimul, 2022).

### **2.2. Destination brand attachment**

The concept of "attachment" was initially introduced within the realm of psychology to describe the development of an emotional connection in interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1979). Emotional attachment is the explanation for the connections between individuals and the things around them that have a significant and long-lasting impact on the formation of identity and close relationships. Attachment ties, such as those between a young boy and the toys he plays with, are formed during the early stages of infancy. According to research that has been conducted in the field of psychology, emotional attachment motivates people to behave positively toward the object of their affection and to communicate a strong desire to maintain the connection indefinitely (Barreda et al., 2020).

Tourism destinations also use the idea of brand attachment. For instance, destination brand attachment (DBA), as described by (Japutra et al., 2021) demonstrates the degree of a traveler's affinity for a particular destination brand. Destination attachment (Dwyer et al., 2019) is the emotional connection that forms between a destination and a tourist on a social and physical level. The concept of tourism destination attachment is made up of place dependency and place

recognition, according to research by (Yuksel et al., 2010). Tourists' interactions with the destination brand strengthen their attachment to it, according to research by (Prayag et al., 2018). This has a range of positive consequences on destination satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth recommendations.

### **2.3. Self-brand connection**

Self-brand connection is defined as an individual's presumption towards a specific brand of their choosing. The literature defines it as the degree to which a buyer integrates a brand into their sense of self. Customers may create a bond with a brand that is representative of their self-concepts when there are significant brand ties (Chand & Fei, 2021). Self-brand connections may be utilized to meet psychological needs, affirm identity, and enable social interaction.

On occasion, customers create strong bonds with the brands that help them form or convey the required self-concepts. Customers usually engage in a matching or pairing process when they select goods and companies that complement their self-images. This procedure is made easier thanks to the wide accessibility of different brands and the wide variety of visual representations connected to those companies. People can make links between their sense of self and a brand when they feel that their self-concepts and the images that brands create are consistent. Self-brand links are created to satisfy psychological needs, affirm one's identity, and promote interpersonal relationships (Kemp et al., 2012).

### **2.4. Destination brand image**

The destination brand image is the consumer's mental picture of the product, which connects symbolic meanings to a brand destination's distinguishing characteristics. By developing a strong and distinct brand identity, destinations may position their offerings and directly appeal to the needs of the customers they are targeting. destination brands often create a set of quality expectations or pictures of the destination that people normally desire before consumption and that are either spread positively or negatively after consumption. Numerous studies have focused on the qualities of destination brands as fit. The brand image of a tourist site is influenced by both the tourists' own experiences and the promotion of the destination by marketers. (Manhas et al., 2016).

The idea of a destination's brand image is a complex one that includes people's opinions, perceptions, and feelings about a specific place. As a result, measuring destination images depends on evaluating both cognitive and emotive images. Regardless of prior tourist history, tourists' judgments, beliefs, and knowledge shape their cognitive image of a destination, which is frequently connected to the attributes and qualities of the destination. Affective image in the context of tourism refers to the emotional reactions or responses displayed by visitors toward a specific destination (Tran et al., 2023).

### **2.5. Destination brand advocacy**

The concept of brand advocacy has gained significance within the consumer-brand relationship as it enables consumers to achieve their social identity objectives in the perception of others (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017). Brand advocacy plays a vital role in the success of a brand, particularly concerning various marketing activities such as referrals to potential customers among family and friends. Brand advocacy plays a crucial role in driving sales growth, fostering a strong customer-brand relationship, and fostering deep brand engagement. This, in turn, leads to heightened brand loyalty, increased brand engagement, and a stronger destination brand attachment (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020).

The current study defines destination brand advocacy as the deliberate steps people take to uphold or defend the advantageous qualities of a particular destination brand by recommending it to

others. Numerous factors appear to affect tourists' support for a specific destination, according to earlier studies. These elements include the destination image (Chen, 2018), destination brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011), destination personality (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), destination brand engagement (Rather et al., 2020), satisfaction with the destination, and relationships with the destination.

An increasing body of research suggests that people who are considering traveling actively explore social media platforms for information about their desired destinations. The underlying variables that motivate tourists to exchange information have been the subject of several academic research. Additionally, studies have been done to pinpoint the precise content kinds that are frequently shared on social networking sites. (Wilk, Sadeque, et al., 2021). The researchers in a recent study (Du et al., 2022) emphasized the importance of social media platforms in facilitating destination brand endorsement. This is seen in the way tourists actively participate and spread the word about their positive interactions with others.

## **2.6. Destination brand loyalty**

Destination brand loyalty (DBL) is a term used in the tourism and hospitality literature to describe travelers' propensity to visit a particular site again and their willingness to promote it to others. (Myagmarsuren & Chen, 2011). Tourism, hospitality, leisure, and other industries are starting to take notice of the importance of destination brand loyalty (DBL) (Tsai, 2021), (Yoo & Bai, 2013), and (Veal, 2021). The implementation of this methodology enables ecotourism management to evaluate the degree to which they have effectively achieved their desired goals, such as promoting repeat visits and garnering favorable recommendations (Azinuddin et al., 2022).

The act of revisiting and recommending an ecotourism destination is closely associated with a rise in revenue, thereby contributing to the economic sustainability of the said destination. Despite the extensive scholarly discourse surrounding the concept of ecotourism in recent decades, there remains a dearth of research regarding the strategies that can effectively cultivate tourist loyalty towards ecotourism destinations. The management of customer loyalty is advantageous across various industries. Research has revealed that a modest increase of 5% in customer loyalty within the service industry results in a substantial boost of 85% in profits. Furthermore, it is economically advantageous to maintain the existing customer base rather than focusing on acquiring new customers. Additionally, the tourism industry places a strong premium on the concept of loyalty. The extensive range of travel-related products and services that tourism destinations provide is employed in conjunction with the destination's brand loyalty (Quoquab et al., 2021).

With strong correlations between organizational success and the reputation of destinations across many nations and tourist sites, destination brand loyalty has evolved as an essential component of tourism marketing tactics. The measurement of brand loyalty towards destinations has gained significant attention in both theoretical and empirical research. This is mainly due to the recognition that loyalty is a more reliable indicator of actual consumer behavior, as supported by studies conducted by (Jraisat et al., 2015). The degree of devotion and emotional attachment people have to a certain destination. Tourist rates, trip plans, and word-of-mouth recommendations to others can all be used to analyze this phenomenon. (Pike et al., 2010).

## **Hypothesis development:**

### **Destination brand attachment and destination brand loyalty:**

It has been found that the phenomenon of brand attachment has a major impact on consumer actions that are advantageous to a brand. These behaviors include but are not limited to, loyalty and an intention to pay extra for the brand (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). (Hwang et al., 2019) found that brand attachment has a positive impact on customers' intentions to remain loyal, their

frequency of visits, and their spending patterns, eventually enhancing profitability. According to analysis, DBA's contributions to destination brand management and destination marketing have had a major impact (Pike & Page, 2014).

H1: Destination brand attachment significantly affects the destination brand loyalty.

Brand attachment influences advocacy behaviors and encourages consumers to engage with the brand in self-reflection and response, which fosters public brand support and advocacy. Advocacy is supported by beliefs that motivate customers to express favorable sentiments about a particular business. Promoting goods and services on "opinion platforms" is another kind of advocacy. Customers always connect with a brand if they are closely associated with it, and this causes them to become brand advocates as well. As a result, (Kumar et al., 2023) suggest that brand attachment and advocacy have a favorable association.

H2: Destination brand attachment significantly affects destination brand advocacy.

Destination attachment, or the process by which people form affective bonds to physical places, is closely related to the idea of destination image. Prior research has also shown that locals appear to exhibit higher levels of destination attachment when they have more positive place images. Image is a dynamic construct that shifts as the place does, whereas attachment is more stable and less likely to alter. Furthermore, it is predicted that place attachment and destination image will both have a positive affect (Stylidis, 2020).

H3: Destination brand attachment significantly affects the destination brand image.

#### **Self-brand connection and destination brand loyalty, advocacy, and image:**

Researchers (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Thanh et al., 2020) stated that self-brand connection is anticipated to foster a favorable mindset and influence brand loyalty; consumers will uphold their relationship with the brands that are integrated into their ideas; in other words, customers who are associated with a brand will be loyal to that brand. As (Khamitov et al., 2019; McManus et al., 2022) there is evidence to imply that brand loyalty can be significantly predicted by feeling emotionally tied to a brand or believing that a brand reflects who they are. (Oliver, 1999) found a favorable correlation between brand loyalty and self-brand connection.

H4: Self-brand connection significantly affects the destination brand loyalty.

Self-brand connection refers to how much a certain brand is integrated into one's self-concept. This is told through stories, which have the potential to foster a sense of self-brand connection in customers if they lead them to believe that the brand helps them meet psychological requirements connected to themselves (Chand & Fei, 2021). People who have a strong connection with the brand might also be inclined to advocate it. People will defend a brand among their reference groups if they have a strong connection with it (Moliner et al., 2018). Strong self-connections to brands facilitate the easier and more frequent perception of brand-related thoughts and emotions (Park et al., 2009). Building a self-brand connection increases the likelihood of speaking positively about a brand. The study makes the following hypothesis based on the justification mentioned above.

H5: Self-brand connection significantly affects the destination brand advocacy.

According to (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), the self-brand connection is a reference to the consumer's self-concept. When a consumer expresses himself or herself to others through a brand image, a strong connection is made. These customers will use the brand image to portray their actual or ideal self-images to others or themselves to achieve their identity goals. A brand image that reflects

the consumer's self-image makes it easier for the consumer to identify with the brand. To establish a long-lasting relationship with one's self-brand, this link is necessary (Li et al., 2022).

H6: Self-brand connection significantly affects the destination brand image.

**Destination brand image and destination brand loyalty and advocacy:**

To define destination image, one must take into account the factors that draw tourists to a particular location. According to (Pike et al., 2019) destination image entails creating, disseminating, and marketing a destination brand. In the global context, a product that attracts visitors and encourages their behavior such as intention to return, suggestion, and advocacy is regarded as a developing idea in the tourism industry. An individual's perception of a destination or thing in their mind is based on their knowledge (beliefs), emotions, and overall impression (Saini & Arasanmi, 2021). The tourism literature has recognized destination brand image as a crucial element of brand loyalty. Others have countered that while destination brand image is not the sole factor contributing to a destination's success, it is unquestionably essential to the development of brand loyalty. (Wisker et al., 2023).

H7: Destination brand image significantly affects destination brand loyalty.

H8: Destination brand image significantly affects the destination brand advocacy.

**Destination brand loyalty and destination brand advocacy:**

According to (Tran et al., 2022) destination brand loyalty describes a strong attachment that develops between a tourist and a destination through plans to return or word-of-mouth recommendations. Interestingly, brand advocacy appears to encourage consumers to publicly express their brand devotion and support the brand by sharing their affinity with it with others. Such brand support is advantageous to the brand since it presents the brand favorably to potential customers (Wilk, Soutar, et al., 2021).

H9: Destination brand loyalty significantly affects the destination brand advocacy.

**The mediating role of destination brand image:**

H10: Destination brand image significantly mediates the relationship between destination brand attachment and destination brand loyalty.

H11: Destination brand image mediates the relationship between destination brand attachment and destination brand advocacy.

H12: Destination brand image mediates the relationship between self-brand connection and destination brand loyalty.

H13: Destination brand image significantly affects the relationship between self-brand connection and destination brand advocacy.

## 2.7. Conceptual Framework

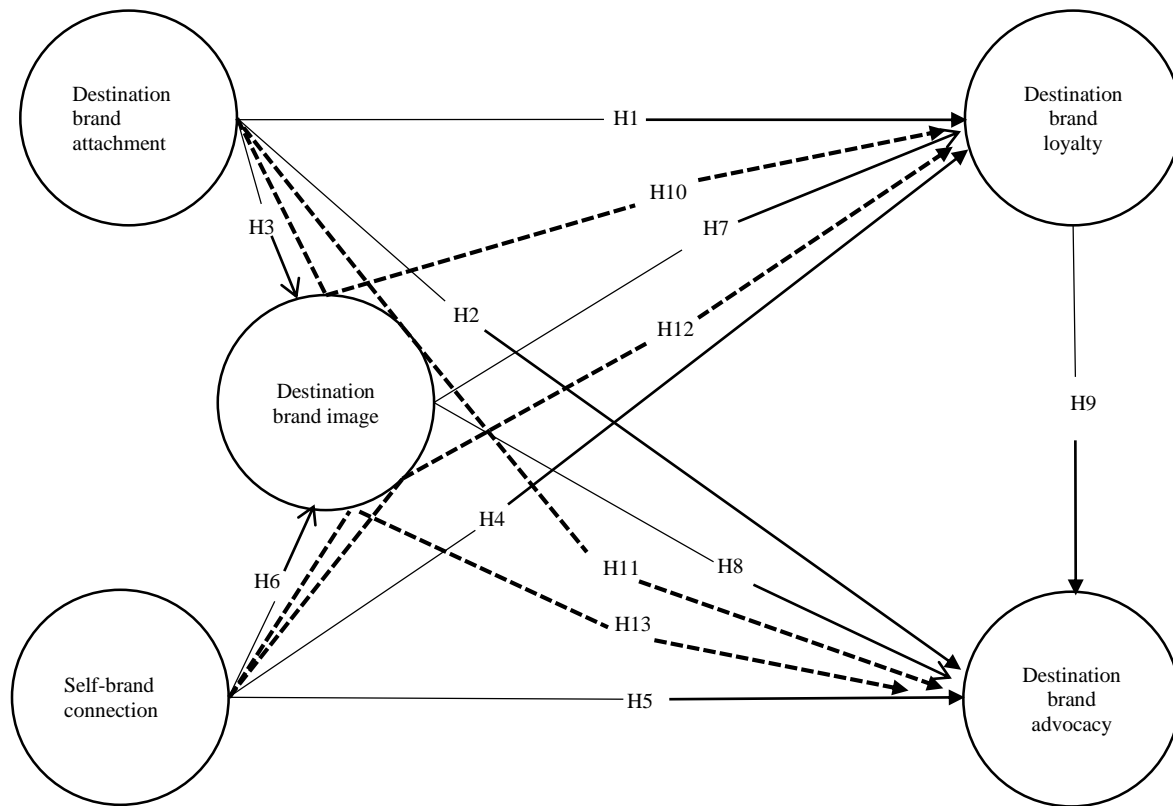


Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Sampling and data collection

In this study, we randomly selected a sample of 240 Pakistani tourists from various regions. Data collection involved utilizing a web-based survey created through Google Forms. The form was distributed through various social media platforms. Each survey was accompanied by a cover letter that underscored its voluntary and confidential nature. Over two months, willing respondents completed the questionnaire within a 15 to 20-minute timeframe, demonstrating a high level of cooperation. Due to limitations in terms of time and resources, we used a convenience sampling method, selecting participants based on their availability and accessibility. This approach successfully facilitated data collection, resulting in a representative sample of both Pakistani locals and eco-tourists for subsequent analysis.

### 3.2 Measures

To access destination brand attachment we adopted the measure promoted by (Huang et al., 2017), and the self-brand connection measure adapted by (Chand & Fei, 2021). The destination brand image and destination brand loyalty were adopted from (Quoquab et al., 2021). Destination brand advocacy was modified by using the (Rather et al., 2020) proposed measure. This study utilized



seven-point Likert scales (ranging from 1, indicating strongly disagree, to 7, indicating strongly agree) to assess and analyze the variables. All items of scales are mentioned in table 2.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

To investigate the complex relationships, including mediation effects, among the proposed constructs and to ensure broader applicability across various social science disciplines like marketing, hospitality, consumer behavior, and tourism, this research utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through Smart PLS 4.0 along with its associated techniques, including the PLS algorithm and bootstrapping. Furthermore, this study made use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to perform several tests, including descriptive analyses and Harman's single-factor test.

Table 1: Demographics of participants

Demographic variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	131	54.6
	Female	109	45.4
Age (years)	15-25	146	60.8
	25-35	83	34.6
	35-45	8	3.3
	> 45	3	1.3
Education level	Associate degree	30	12.5
	Bachelors	113	47.1
	Masters	91	37.9
	PHD	6	2.5
Income level	1500001-200000	107	44.5
	125001-150000	67	27.91
	125000	66	27.5

Table 1 demonstrates that the frequency distribution analysis was conducted to evaluate the demographic properties of the data, including factors like gender, age, and educational qualification. According to the frequency distribution data, the majority of respondents were male. Furthermore, a substantial 47.1% of the respondents held Bachelor's degrees, with those aged between 15 and 25 representing the highest response rate at 60%.

### Results and Analysis

With the complexity of the model's direct and indirect relationships, partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the research hypotheses (Chin, 1998). PLS-SEM analysis has two parts, according to Hair et al. (2019), measurement model assessment and structural model assessment.

#### Measurement model analysis

According to Muhammad et al. (2019), the measurement model portrays the relationship between latent variables and the appropriate observed items. The reflecting, formative, and composite models can all have different evaluation criteria for the measuring model (Henseler et al., 2016). All of the constructs in this study were measured reflectively, and as a result, their indicator reliability (outer loading), internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha), convergent validity (AVE), and discriminant validity (HTMT & Fornell and Larcker's) were all tested Hair et al. (2017).

Table 2 Measurement model

Construct	Measurement items	Loading	Outer VIF	CA	CR	AVE
Destination brand attachment (DBAT)	DBA 4: Destination brand makes me feel passionate.	0.715	1.629	0.840	0.843	0.555
	DBA 5: I am delighted about the destination brand.	0.747	1.637			
	DBA 6: I am captivated by the destination brand.	0.737	1.698			
	DBA 7: I am attached to the destination brand.	0.763	1.816			
	DBA 8: I feel peaceful about the destination brand.	0.728	1.686			
	DBA 9: I am friendly about the destination brand.	0.776	1.785			
Self-brand connection (SBC)	SBC 1: The destination brand reflects who I am.	0.720	1.442	0.858	0.865	0.705
	SBC 2: I can identify with the destination brand.	0.880	2.688			
	SBC 3: I feel a personal connection to the destination brand.	0.892	2.882			
	SBC 4: I (can) use this destination brand to communicate who I am to other people.	0.855	2.147			
Destination brand image (DBI)	DBI 1: This eco destination fits my personality	0.755	1.476	0.821	0.821	0.652
	DBI 2: My friend would think highly of me if I visited this eco-destination	0.817	1.859			
	DBI 3: The image of this eco-destination is consistent with my self-image	0.832	1.974			
	DBI 4: Visiting an eco-destination reflects who I am	0.834	1.824			
Destination brand advocacy (DBA)	DBA 1: I love to talk about the good points of this destination to people I know.	0.816	1.493	0.747	0.747	0.664
	DBA 2: I would recommend visiting this destination to others.	0.826	1.586			
	DBA3: I have managed to convince other people to visit this destination	0.802	1.425			

Destination brand loyalty (DBL)	DBL 1: I intend to visit the eco-tourism destination in the future	0.718	1.362	0.806	0.808	0.634
	DBL 2: The ecotourism destination would be my preferred choice for a vacation in Pakistan	0.823	1.961			
	DBL 3: Even if visiting another destination is cheaper, I would prefer to visit an ecotourism destination	0.828	1.957			
	DBL 4: I would recommend to other people to visit ecotourism destination	0.811	1.657			

The standard outer loadings should be 0.708 or greater, according to a conventional rule of thumb. When using newly constructed scales, researchers usually find weaker outer loadings (0.7) in social science research (Hulland, 1999). According to Hair et al. (2011) sometimes indicators with weaker outside loadings are kept because of their use in maintaining the validity of the content. However, it is usually advisable to exclude from the design any indicators with extremely low outer loadings (below 0.40). In our model, the first three DBAT items' outer loading values were weaker, which had an impact on the indicator reliability. We deleted these three items, which had lower outer loadings, as advised by Hair et al. (2011), ensuring that the outer loadings of all remaining items exceeded the critical value of 0.7.

According to Henseler et al. (2016) for the measurement model to be considered internally consistent and reliable, Cronbach's alpha (internal consistency reliability) and composite reliability values must be more than 0.7. According to Table 2, all constructs' CR and CA values are higher than the advised value of 0.70. These findings show that the measurement models were reliable and internally consistent. Additionally, all constructs had average variance extracted (AVE) values greater than 0.50 indicating the presence of convergent validity.

Table 3a:

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) – Matrix

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
<b>1. DBA</b>					
<b>2. DBAT</b>	0.657				
<b>3. DBI</b>	0.715	0.804			
<b>4. DBL</b>	0.698	0.731	0.802		
<b>5. SBC</b>	0.723	0.796	0.780	0.741	

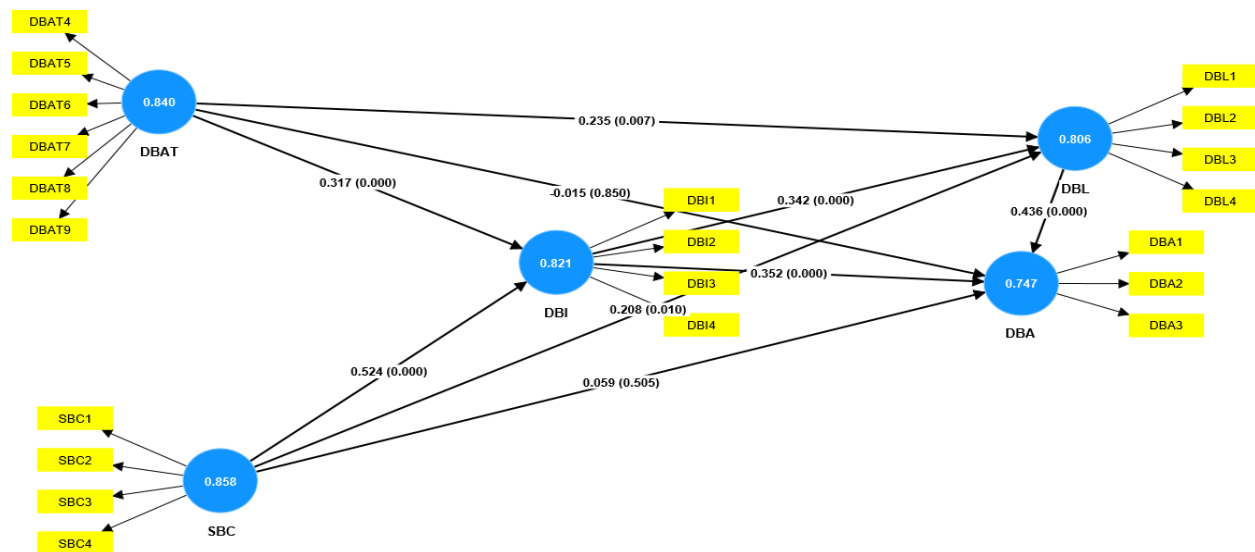
Table 3b:

Fornell-Lacker criterion

	<b>DBA</b>	<b>DBAT</b>	<b>DBI</b>	<b>DBL</b>	<b>SBC</b>
<b>DBA</b>	<b>0.815</b>				
<b>DBAT</b>	0.526	<b>0.745</b>			
<b>DBI</b>	0.671	0.671	<b>0.807</b>		

<b>DBL</b>	0.694	0.606	0.654	<b>0.796</b>	
<b>SBC</b>	0.580	0.677	0.738	0.620	<b>0.839</b>

The heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) and Fornell-lacker criterion were then used to test the discriminant validity. According to (Henseler et al., 2015), the HTMT technique illustrates the ratio of between-to-within-construct correlation. All HTMT values are below the suggested value of 0.9, as can be shown in Table 3a. The outcomes showed that the value of 1 is not present in any HTMT confidence interval. According to Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion, all items varied between the constructs, and all AVE values on the diagonal were higher than their off-the-diagonal values (see Table 3b), demonstrating the constructs' sufficient discriminant validity. Correlations are shown by the values off the diagonal, whereas the square root of the AVE is represented by the values on the diagonal (bold and italic). All of the study constructs were therefore found to have discriminant validity.



**Figure 2: Measurement model**

### Structural Model Assessment

According to Mohammed et al. (2019), the structural model demonstrates the relationships between the study's constructs. It is necessary to solve the collinearity issue before assessing the structural model. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) ought to be less than five (Kock & Lynn, 2012). There are no collinearity issues with the model (see inner VIF in Table 4 and outer VIF in Table 2). Path coefficients and the coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>) were applied, as recommended by (Hair et al., 2019), to evaluate the structural model. For the path-coefficient calculation and the R<sup>2</sup> calculation, respectively, we used bootstrapping and the PLS algorithm.

**Table 4: Hypothesis testing and strength of model**

Hypotheses	Relationship	Inner VIF	B Values	Mean	SD	T values	P values	Decision
<b>Direct effect</b>								
<b>H1</b>	DBAT→DBL	2.095	0.235	0.238	0.088	2.689	0.007	Supported

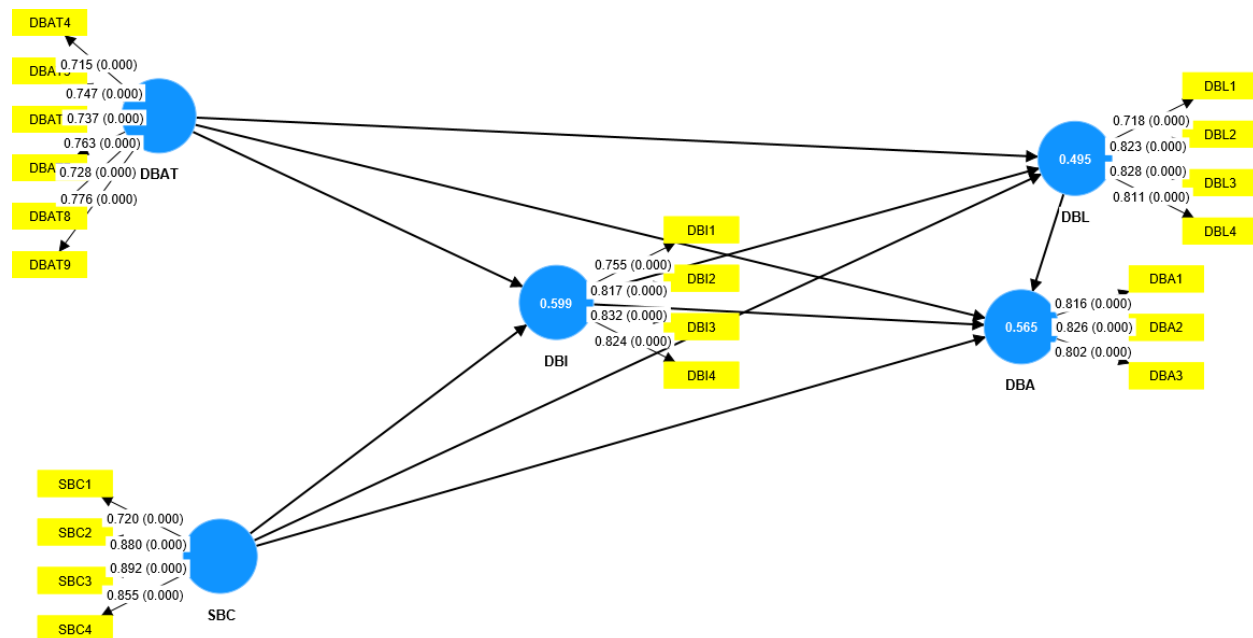
<b>H2</b>	DBAT→DBA	2.205	-0.015	-0.011	0.077	0.190	0.850	Rejected
<b>H3</b>	DBAT→DBI	1.845	0.317	0.320	0.070	4.555	0.000	Supported
<b>H4</b>	SBC→DBL	2.530	0.208	0.208	0.081	2.562	0.010	Supported
<b>H5</b>	SBC→DBA	2.616	0.059	0.059	0.089	0.667	0.505	Rejected
<b>H6</b>	SBC→DBI	1.845	0.524	0.523	0.067	7.827	0.000	Supported
<b>H7</b>	DBI→DBL	2.497	0.342	0.341	0.088	3.897	0.000	Supported
<b>H8</b>	DBI→DBA	2.728	0.352	0.353	0.096	3.683	0.002	Supported
<b>H9</b>	DBL→DBA	1.981	0.436	0.433	0.078	5.553	0.000	Supported
<b>Indirect effect</b>								
<b>H10</b>	DBAT→DBI→DBL	NA	0.108	0.109	0.036	3.005	0.003	Supported
<b>H11</b>	DBAT→DBI→DBA	NA	0.112	0.111	0.035	3.161	0.002	Supported
<b>H12</b>	SBC→DBI→DBL	NA	0.179	0.179	0.054	3.300	0.001	Supported
<b>H13</b>	SBC→DBI→DBA	NA	0.184	0.186	0.060	3.092	0.002	Supported

The direct hypotheses were assessed in the structural model evaluation using the bootstrapping approach with 10,000 resamples, and the findings showed that, based on the acceptance threshold ( $t$  value  $>1.96$ ,  $p$ -value  $0.05$ ), eleven of the thirteen hypotheses were supported. The results showed that DBAT significantly affects the DBL with path values ( $\beta=0.264$ ,  $t=2.916$ ,  $p=0.004$ ), DBAT insignificantly affects the DBA ( $\beta=0.081$ ,  $t=1.240$ ,  $p=0.215$ ), and DBAT significantly affect the DBI with path values ( $\beta=0.301$ ,  $t=4.106$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) respectively; therefore, H1 and H3 hypothesis is supported and H2 is rejected. Further SBC also has a significant affect on DBL with path values ( $\beta=0.177$ ,  $t=2.074$ ,  $p=0.038$ ), SBC insignificantly affects the DBA with path values ( $\beta=0.095$ ,  $t=1.278$ ,  $p=0.201$ ) and SBC significantly affects the DBI with path values ( $\beta=0.528$ ,  $t=7.220$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) which means that H4 and H6 hypothesis is supported and H5 is rejected. Further, the DBI significantly affects the DBL and DBA with path values ( $\beta=0.349$ ,  $t=3.948$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) and ( $\beta=0.256$ ,  $t=3.137$ ,  $p=0.002$ ) therefore H7 and H8 hypothesis are supported. In addition, DBL also significantly affects the DBA with path values ( $\beta=0.436$ ,  $t=5.553$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) therefore, the H9 hypothesis is supported.

The  $R^2$  value assesses the predictive power of the suggested model and accounts for the contribution of each construct. The  $R^2$  value is a range between 0 and 1, where values of 0.2, 0.50, and 0.75, respectively, reflect weak, moderate, and considerable impacts (Hair et al., 2019). The  $R^2$  values for the model used in this study are reasonable, with values of 0.565 for DBA, 0.599 for DBI, and .495 for DBL.

## Mediation Effect

The bootstrapping technique was used to calculate the indirect effects to explore the mediating role of DBI. The results in table 2 indicate that DBI positively and significantly mediate the relationships between DBAT and DBL (DBAT→DBI→DBL), DBAT and DBA (DBAT→DBI→DBA), SBC and DBL (SBC→DBI→DBL), and between the SBC and DBA (SBC→DBI→DBA) with path coefficient, ( $\beta = .105$ ,  $t = 3.087$ ,  $p = .002$ ), ( $\beta = 0.077$ ,  $t = 2.660$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), ( $\beta = 0.184$ ,  $t = 3.169$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) and ( $\beta = 0.135$ ,  $t = 2.727$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) respectively; therefore, H10, H11, H12, and H13 are supported. It can be drawn from this that the mediation effect is statistically significant. As recommended by Hair et al. (2017), this study continues to use mediation analysis. It can be said that DBI partially mediates the interaction between DBAT and DBL, SBC, and DBL because these variables have direct links as well. It might be stated that DBI fully mediates the relationship between DBAT and DBA, SBC, and DBA because there is no direct relationship between DBAT and DBA, SBC and DBA.



## Discussion

By including attachment theory in the analysis, this study investigates a key aspect of destination branding, particularly in the context of ecotourism. This innovative strategy expands the literature on destination branding and sheds light on the complex relationships between numerous elements like destination brand attachment, self-brand connection, destination brand image, destination brand advocacy, and loyalty. The mediating impact of destination brand image was evaluated to investigate the combined effect of constructs in the proposed model.

The findings of this research revealed a favorable and substantial correlation between DBAT and DBL, supporting the hypothesis (H1). This result is consistent with earlier research (Hwang et al., 2019) showing a noteworthy impact of DBA on DBL. This implies that travelers are more likely to stick with a destination over time if they feel a strong emotional or personal connection to it. This realization emphasizes how crucial it is to develop strong emotional ties with tourists to promote enduring loyalty in the context of destination branding. However, the effect of DBAT on

DBA shows an insignificant relationship which rejects the H2. This shows that tourists may have an emotional connection to a destination brand, but it doesn't mean that they will always be advocating for the brand. This finding suggests that advocacy acts may not always be motivated by emotional attachment alone.

The study's results support the hypothesis (H3) by showing a positive correlation between DBAT and DBI. This implies that travelers' image of an ecotourism destination is positively impacted when they feel an emotional connection to it. This suggests that the way eco-tourists perceive and value a destination's ecological initiatives, natural beauty, and sustainability efforts is greatly influenced by their emotional attachment to it. These results highlight how critical it is to cultivate emotional bonds to improve the favorable perception of ecotourism sites. Additionally, the results of earlier research (Stylidis, 2020) show that DBAT enhances DBI.

The results support the hypothesis (H4) by showing a positive relationship between SBC and DBL. This suggests that people are more inclined to show devotion to a destination when they strongly identify with its brand. This outcome is in line with previous studies (Oliver, 1999). However, the relationship between SBC and DBA is insignificant, rejecting the hypothesis(H5). This suggests that although a personal bond encourages allegiance, it does not always result in proactive advocacy actions, like telling others about the destination. Therefore, loyalty is more influenced by self-brand connection to a destination brand than advocacy.

The results support hypothesis (H6) by showing a positive relationship between SBC and DBI. This implies that people who have a close personal relationship with a destination brand tend to see the destination more favorably. Put differently, people's perceptions of a destination's reputation and overall image are shaped by the way they feel attached to a particular brand.

The findings indicate that DBI positively and significantly influences the DBL and DBA, which supports hypotheses H7 and H8. The results show that higher tourist loyalty is correlated with a favorable destination brand image. This result is consistent with earlier research (Pike et al., 2019). The results of H8 show that tourists are more inclined to recommend a destination when they have a favorable perception of its brand. A positive destination brand image also leads to higher levels of advocacy.

According to the results, DBL has a beneficial effect on DBA, supporting Hypothesis 9. This finding is in full line with earlier studies conducted in the same field, supporting the idea that loyal customers are more willing to participate in meaningful advocacy actions.

The mediation analysis in this study shed light on the intricate connections between DBAT, SBC, DBI, DBL, and DBA. Our results support H10 and H11 and show that DBI plays a substantial mediating role in the relationship between DBAT, DBL, and DBA. This shows that travelers' brand attachment to a destination brand is filtered through the destination's image rather than translating directly into advocacy. The validation of H12 and H13 also shows that DBI mediates the relationship between SBC and DBL and DBA. This implies that the intermediary function of destination brand image influences destination brand advocacy in addition to personal identification with a brand.

### **Theoretical implication**

Firstly, the current study contributes significantly to the theory by offering a strong framework to investigate visitor advocacy and loyalty to eco-destination. Moreover, the tourist attachment theory incorporates this paradigm. This study expands the idea of attachment theory to the literature on brand loyalty and advocacy for eco-tourism destinations. According to the theory, tourists'

attachment to the destination brand shapes their preferences and loyalty (McIntyre, 2007; Suhartanto et al., 2021). Secondly, the study's empirical approach outlines the significant connections that mediate the influence of destination brand image. The study's findings demonstrate that self-brand connection, destination brand attachment, and eco-tourism destination brand loyalty and advocacy are all mediated by destination brand image. This integrates the current research into a set of literature already in existence. (Cifci, 2022; Suhartanto et al., 2021). Thirdly, this research is crucial given the statistics from Pakistan, Pakistan is expected to generate USD 5.9% 818 in GDP in 2022 and USD 30 billion in revenue annually according to the World Bank, Tourism is one of the exciting areas of Pakistan's economy, which is expanding more quickly. (Jehan et al., 2023). The current study will catalyze more research to better understand Pakistani tourists' preferences to advocate for environmentally friendly tourist destinations.

### **Practical implication**

The management of Pakistan's ecotourism destination brands is anticipated to benefit from this study by better understanding what attracts tourists, encouraging them to return and advocate for the same place. The managers might use the data to determine if tourists plan to return or more importantly recommend the destination brand to others. To get the financing required to be sustainable and guarantee that these protected sites will remain accessible for many future generations to enjoy, the ongoing support of the tourists is essential. As stated in the study below, this study has some practical consequences.

Firstly, many research findings indicate that the most crucial variables in predicting the DBL are DBAT and SBC. Secondly, this specific study discovered that these constructs influence the DBA via the mediation of DBI. Therefore, efforts directed toward strengthening tourists' favorable impression of the destination brand can greatly impact their loyalty and advocacy. According to this, destination managers and companies should concentrate on developing genuine, unforgettable, and satisfying experiences with the destination brand that appeals to tourists' attachment and connection and so increase their advocacy and loyalty.

Thirdly, the image of a destination brand plays a significant role in influencing tourists and advocating for destination brands, both directly and indirectly through self-brand connections and destination-brand attachment. As a result, to draw more travelers to ecotourism destinations, practitioners and the government must concentrate on creating favorable DBI. Promoting the destination's distinctive attractions, highlighting its eco-friendly initiatives, and improving its reputation are all crucial strategies. Sustainable tourism growth can be promoted by eco-tourism destinations by increasing their DBI, which in turn draws more visitors.

Fourthly, the results showed that DBL is the least significant factor in predicting DBA. Loyal tourists are willing to pay more to visit ecotourism destinations, and they also recommend them to others. A destination that succeeds in winning over tourists' loyalty will be able to maintain its current level of income and even improve its offerings; after all, repeat visitors bring in new ones.

The participation of the local community is a crucial component and standard of ecotourism. According to (Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015), if managed properly, the ecotourism business has the power to improve the quality of life for locals by boosting their income and opening up job opportunities. According to (Bhuiyan et al., 2016), the ecotourism industry's success is thought to be attributable to the communities' sufficient participation in economic activities. The development of jobs and additional revenue can help the community improve its economic situation. Better economic conditions are therefore anticipated, but preparation is needed to guarantee that the right actions are taken to prevent any threats to the environment, the local population, or the community.



### **Future recommendations and limitations**

Despite its insightfulness, this study has some limitations that should be taken into account for further investigation. The generalizability of the findings is limited by the study's focus on eco-tourists from developing countries. Future studies should consider a more diverse sample that reflects a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural backgrounds to increase the scope of application. To understand how brand attachment is changing and to go beyond the cross-sectional perspective of the study, longitudinal studies are essential. There is a need to use other mediators such as environmental awareness and cultural inequities. Nuanced insights could be obtained by comparing studies across ecotourism segments and examining the effects of destination marketing methods. In-depth interviews and other qualitative techniques provide valuable insight into the motivations of travelers. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine digital platforms and technology, such as virtual reality and online reviews. In the digital age, knowing how they affect brand attachment is essential. By addressing these issues, we can improve our knowledge of destination branding and help destination managers promote eco-friendly travel behaviors that are sustainable.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, by incorporating attachment theory into the context of eco-tourism, the study makes a substantial contribution to the field of destination branding. The results provide a complex understanding of the connections between advocacy, loyalty, destination brand image, self-brand connection, and destination brand attachment. Destination managers and eco-tourist companies may create successful strategies to increase visitors' attachment and loyalty by understanding how these aspects interact, which will eventually promote sustainable tourism practices and enjoyable travel experiences.

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