



# Brand addiction: Exploring the concept and its definition through an experiential lens<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Brand addiction is one of the most important ways that consumers engage with brands. Other types of consumer-brand relationships include brand attachment, brand love, brand loyalty, brand passion and brand trust. This study provides an experientially grounded conceptualization and definition of brand addiction that distinguishes it clearly from other forms of consumer-brand relationships; and also from compulsive buying and acquisitive desire. Qualitative data from focus groups and projective-technique-based interviews were used to identify eleven salient properties which, in combination, characterize brand addiction: acquisitiveness; anxiety-irritability, bonding, brand exclusivity, collecting, compulsive urges, financial management versus debt tolerance, dependence, gratification, mental and behavioral preoccupation, and word of mouth. We compare brand addiction with the features of other consumer-brand relationships. The findings suggest that brand addiction is different from other consumer-brand-relationship concepts, and does not necessarily lead to harmful consequences for all brand addicts (unlike many other types of addiction).

## 1. Introduction

Brand addiction is one of the most important ways in which consumers engage with brands (Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Reimann, Castaño, Zaichkowsky, & Bechara, 2012). Consumers also associate with brands via brand attachment (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995); brand liking (Anselmsson, Johansson, & Persson, 2008); brand love (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006); brand loyalty (Fournier & Yao, 1997; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Oliver, 1999); brand passion (Swimberghe, Astakhova, & Wooldridge, 2014); and brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2001). Among addictive consumption behaviors, compulsive buying has attracted the most research attention. However, addictive brand behaviors have not been explored in depth since this phenomenon was noted in Fournier's (1998) seminal paper on consumer-brand relationships. Consumer-brand relationships involve emotions that range from non-intense feelings to passionate love culminating in addictive obsession (e.g., Fehr & Russell, 1991; Fournier, 1998; Sternberg, 1986) (see Table 1 for definitions of these various concepts within consumer-brand relationships). We respond to recent

calls for further research into consumers' addictive behaviors (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013; Swimberghe et al., 2014) by focusing on the salient properties of brand addiction at the conceptual level; and exploring the associated boundary conditions that underlie brand addiction compared with other forms of consumer-brand relationships.

We begin by reviewing relevant literature on consumer-brand relationships and addictive behaviors in order to identify the focal issues. We then describe the procedures for data collection, analysis and interpretation. We report the essential features of brand addiction identified from our focus groups and projective-technique-based interviews. We offer a conceptual definition of brand addiction from a more inductive, phenomenon-based approach to consumer-psychology related issues (Pham, 2013). We then compare the essential features of brand addiction to other types of consumer-brand relationships. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications, limitations and directions for future research on addictive consumer-brand relationships.

## 2. Theoretical background

An important distinction can be drawn between drug addiction and

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**Table 1**  
Definitions of popular consumer-brand relationship constructs.

Construct	Definition
Brand love	“The degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81).
Brand passion	“A strong emotional connection to a brand that people value, find important, desire to own and/or use, incorporate into their identity, and invest resources in over a period of time” (Swimberghe et al., 2014, p. 2659).
Brand attachment	“The strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self” (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; p. 2).
Brand trust	“The willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82).
Brand loyalty	“A deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior” (Oliver, 1999, p. 34 cited in Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82).
Brand liking	“An evaluative and global measurement capturing how positive and strong the perceived brand assets are from a consumer perspective” (Anselmsson et al., 2008, p.66–67).
Compulsive buying	“A chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings” (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989, p. 155, cited in Faber & O’Guinn, 1992, p.459).

non-drug addiction. Drug addiction is defined as “a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences” (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2016). This definition is not applicable to brand addiction because brand addiction does not involve taking drugs.

Non-drug-related addiction is seen in a wide range of consumer behavioral addictions such as shopping, technology use, exercising, gambling, playing video games, hoarding, overeating, plastic surgery, pornography, kleptomania, dietary supplement usage and religious convictions (Martin et al., 2013). Addiction, in the context of consumers' associations with brands, was first mentioned by Fajer and Schouten (1995). Fournier (1998) included brand addiction in her conceptualization of consumer-brand relationships, which ranged in intensity from superficial effects to simple liking, friendly affection, passionate love, and addictive obsession (Fehr & Russell, 1991; Sternberg, 1986). Reimann et al. (2012) showed that close consumer-brand relationships are associated with the activation of an individual's brain area linked to addictive behaviors such as alcohol addiction (Myrick et al., 2004) and nicotine addiction (McClernon, Hiott, Huettel, & Rose, 2005). Based on this finding, Reimann et al. (2012) called on researchers to distinguish between the states of commitment to a brand and the state of addiction to a brand.

Extant literature on consumer behavioral addictions has shown both negative and positive associations. Fournier (1998) picks up on the negative associations of addiction and reports several dark aspects of relationships with brands (i.e., dependency, enmity, enslavement, and secret affairs). Recently, Fournier and Alvarez (2013) have proposed an attachment-aversion relationship (AA Relationship) model with three pairs related to “asset (benefit)/liability” i.e., enticing/annoying-the-self, enabling/disabling-the-self, and enriching/impoverishing-the-self. Their AA relationship model encompasses positive and negative aspects; and suggests that when self-relevant benefits (enticing-the-self, enabling-the-self, and enriching-the-self) materialize, the consumer-brand relationship rises to a level similar to other intimate human relationships.

Brand addiction may also share some features with acquisitive desire (AD) (i.e., the desire to acquire status and expensive belongings). Acquisitive desire is linked with symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and impulsivity; “AD disorders have in common an intense desire to acquire, possess, or hoard objects” (Kottler, Montgomery, & Shepard, 2004, 151). Do these symptoms apply to brand addiction? According to Kottler et al., (2004), acquisitive desire underlies the desire for symbols of success among most people, and these are not necessarily perceived as all negative.

Our starting point is that addiction should be understood as involving the attempt to achieve some appetitive effect and satisfaction through engagement in some behavior, and could have positive or negative implications (Sussman & Sussman, 2011). Our study seeks to distinguish brand addiction from acquisitive desire as well as from other states of brand commitment and consumer-brand relationships

such as brand loyalty and brand love.

### 3. Methodology

We used focus groups and projective interviews to collect our empirical data. The focus group method was used as the first stage, because of its suitability for developing scientific concepts and theories (Calder, 1977; Morgan, 1997; Wilkinson, 1998) from the participants' own lived experiences and its ability to promote self-disclosure of participants' experiences, meanings, standings and viewpoints through the group dynamics in interactions between participants (Freeman, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998). Purposive sampling was used for the focus groups with a criterion that participants should already have a strong attachment to one brand of their own choice. Potential participants were approached via an invitation message on Facebook and public notice boards, targeting residents in the United Kingdom. Thirteen females and eleven males (aged between 18 and 40) were recruited for four focus groups (each group was composed of six individuals), and each session lasted for a maximum of 2 h.

After completing the preliminary focus-group procedures (e.g., Green & Hart, 1999; Kitzinger, 1995; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999), the moderator asked participants to describe a memorable branded gift. A group exercise technique was then used to encourage participants to generate and discuss different types of consumer-brand relationships. After that, participants were prompted to describe what they would call a strong relationship between the consumer and the brand, and the terms “addiction” or “addictive”. Participants described the characteristics that they considered to be associated with addictive behavior towards brands.

The transcripts from the focus group recordings were first reviewed for thematic groupings associated with the research questions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Then, the emergent main themes were identified. Established procedures were used to underline the credibility of the coding and interpretation processes (e.g., Creswell & Miller, 2000; Potter, 2003). First, disconfirming evidence was elicited by noting whether participants formed a consensus or not around a given theme or topic. Second, thick and rich descriptions were developed with detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). An example of the thick and rich descriptions is shown in Appendix A.

To tap into brand addicts' experiences that might have been constrained by the focus-group setting, a further nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted using projective techniques, which “involve the use of stimuli that allow participants to project their subjective or deep-seated beliefs onto other people or objects” (Morrison, Haley, Bartel Sheehan, & Taylor, 2002, p. 63). Projective techniques in interviews help to reveal the feelings, beliefs, attitudes and motivations that individuals find hard to articulate (Webb, 1992), decreases the level of social desirability bias on matters that are prone to social impact (Fisher, 1993), and generates unique, instructive and rich insights into

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