

# Brand addiction: Wow! or woe?

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## Viewpoint/commentary article

*Like any other addiction, it (consumption addiction) distorts simple pleasures into the illusion of omnipotence, and the person will finally become a prisoner of his habits (Spyros Zonakis, 2018).*

Brand addiction is one of the recent additions in the inventory used by the marketing world to nurture and sustain a win-win consumer-brand relationship. Unlike other relational constructs such as brand passion (Swimberghe *et al.*, 2014), brand liking (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2008) and brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Junaid *et al.*, 2019), brand addiction (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017b) is contentious in nature. A careful review suggests that recent conceptualizations of brand addiction (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017b) shy away from its discerned noxious character and do not categorize it as a baleful relationship exclusively. Contrarily, Cui *et al.* (2018) and Mrad and Cui (2017a, 2017b) equate brand addiction with brand love, brand passion, brand attachment, brand liking, brand trust and brand loyalty. They identify brand trust as the precursor and appearance, esteem and life happiness as outcomes of brand addiction (Mrad and Cui, 2017a, 2017b). Thus, they propose an optimistic view for future research and call for an integrated investigation of its adverse outcomes, where it appears somewhat similar to compulsive buying (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad, 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017b, 2019). In our view, imprudent persuasion of this optimistic view of brand addiction may substantially benefit brands but could misrepresent marketing significantly. Brand addiction is defined as:

*a consumer's psychological state that involves mental and behavioral preoccupation with a particular brand, driven by uncontrollable urges to possess the brand's products, and involving positive affectivity and gratification (Cui *et al.*, 2018).*

Cui *et al.* (2018) and Mrad and Cui (2017) identified 11 dimensions each of brand addiction. The findings of these papers are quite similar (Table 1). In both conceptualizations, the facet of bonding identifies itself with details that do not alert to negativity and possible darkness. Meanwhile, the remaining dimensions with neutral designations conceal the precarious details associated with brand addiction. For example, the Acquisitiveness aspect of brand addiction compels addictive consumers to buy, where the drive for buying does not come from need but obsession (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017b). The collection/hoarding dimension refers to the behavior where addicts tend to collect products of the addicted brand and strive to possess the highest percentage of items from their addictive brand. These brand addicts are price insensitive and unwilling to substitute products even if better and/or cheaper alternatives are available in the market (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017b). This might seem favorable from the perspective of affluent consumers but will be a highly problematic scenario for a not-so-rich set of consumers, constituting a major segment of the world population.



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**Table 1.**  
Difference between  
conceptualizations of  
brand addiction

Conceptualizations and Respective Dimensions Mrad and Cui (2017)	Cui <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Difference- Comment
Acquisitiveness	Acquisitiveness	No- these are identical
Dependence	Dependence	No- these are identical
Hoarding	Collecting	No- these are similar
Lack of control	Compulsive urges	No- these are similar
Resistance to substitutes	Brand exclusivity	No- these are similar
Thought occupancy	Mental and behavioral preoccupation	No- these are similar
Outward influence	Word of mouth	No- these are similar
Obsession	Anxiety-irritability (when consumer fail to engage)	No- these are closely related
Persistence within Affordability	Financial management vs. Debt tolerance	Yes- the extension
Support and follow up	Bonding and gratification	Yes- but not unique

According to Cui *et al.* (2018) and Mrad and Cui (2017), the facet of financial management/persistence within affordability suggests that addicted consumers try to save money for their purchases. However, during this process, they may feel anxious or experience irritability (Cui *et al.*, 2018). This irritability can be related to the addicts' obsession (Mrad and Cui, 2017b), resulting in anxiety when they are unable to engage with their favored brands. As a result, addicts may experience negative moods and sudden mood changes. Moreover, they may also show debt tolerance (Cui *et al.*, 2018) and borrow money to satisfy their addiction when they do not have the funds. Cui *et al.* (2018) quote a participant describing addicts: "just keep buying, buying, buying, buying this product. For example, if you love a brand that offers a T-shirt, you'll buy 5, 6, 7, 10 [of the] same T-shirt." This unnecessary, endless buying is unsustainable and will ultimately harm consumers' well-being. Mrad (2018) cites a case of an American lady as an example of a brand addict who received a divorce letter for secretly storing 700 pairs of shoes priced between \$700 and \$4000 per pair. Such behavior is abnormal and ideally should not be encouraged by marketing practices.

Another aspect of brand addiction is brand exclusiveness/resistance to substitutes, which may transform consumers into single-minded addicts and lead to prejudice in favor of addictive brands (Cui *et al.*, 2018). Addicts may become angry when they hear negative comments about their brands; thus, brand addiction may create impatient consumer groups in society, putting the community at risk. According to Cui *et al.* (2018) and (Mrad and Cui, 2017a, 2017b), these brand addicts experience compulsive urges and lack self-control, finding it hard not to enter their favorite brand shops. These brand addicts also exhibit extreme dependence and feel as if they cannot live without their addicted brands. Cui *et al.* (2018) state that a brand addict, in general, feels submissive to the brand. This is precisely where brand addiction parallels drug addiction. Cui *et al.* (2018) attempt to neutralize this by suggesting that this dependence results from consumer cognitive confidence and trust in the utility of the function. In this scenario, this justification is weak given that "cognitive confidence" and "trust in the utility of function" rely on rationality. The addict's behavior, closing themselves off to other brands worldwide despite price and value factors, is not rational by any means.

The facet of gratification refers to experiencing positive emotions. Cui *et al.* (2018) emphasize that brand addicts experience gratification, thus identifying it as a contribution to consumer well-being. However, this is not sufficient because even drug addicts experience

momentary gratification when they take substances. Gratification is a dimension of well-being, but experiencing gratification alone does not constitute overall well-being; sustainable gratification is necessary. The dimensions of mental and behavioral preoccupation/thought occupancy represent a cognitive state of obsessive preoccupation resulting in ever-increasing thoughts (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017a, 2017b). Brand addicts may exert outward influence (Mrad and Cui, 2017b), which is a tendency to influence others about the favored brand, potentially leading to an extreme form of word-of-mouth marketing (Cui *et al.*, 2018). If this is the case, what should we expect from addicts of two different brand cults sitting in one room?

Hence, considering the findings of Cui *et al.* (2018) and Mrad and Cui (2017), marketing may strategically engage consumers at a level by fostering brand addiction, wherein they will:

- buy without need;
- are left with no other choice but to buy;
- become single-minded, prejudiced and reactive;
- become price insensitive and unwilling to substitutes;
- hoard favored brands' products;
- become prone to endless, irrational buying;
- spend all their income on the brand;
- either save and experience anxiety or borrow and expose themselves to other challenges;
- experience irritability;
- experience mental and behavioral preoccupation;
- involve in trash-talking;
- experience irresistible compulsive urges;
- become obsessed and dependent; and
- feel submission to the brand.

Thus, this can disapprove of consumers' sovereignty in the first place; in the long run, it may hurt their well-being and adversely affect their personal and professional lives. Cui *et al.* (2018), Mrad (2018) and Mrad and Cui (2017) emphasize that brand addiction is different from drug addiction, but from their discourse, it seems that both have different mechanisms yet ultimately have detrimental effects. Drug intake directly and visibly harms the addict, while brand addiction harms indirectly and invisibly, which may make its resolution even more complicated. In his report, Spyros Zonakis (2018) quotes Dimitris Begioglou, a clinical psychologist, who comments on consumption addiction: *like any other addiction, it distorts simple pleasures into the illusion of omnipotence, and the person will finally become a prisoner of his habits*. Furthermore, by making consumers addicts, brand addiction may grant infinite power to the marketing world, leading to exploitation and steering it away from its pursuit of *Better Marketing for a Better World* (Giesler, 2019).

In the future, if marketing managers aim for brand addiction, it may trigger a different kind of anti-consumption campaign, such as "Buy Nothing Day," including anti-consumption books like "No Logo" (Klein, 2003) and movies like "Surplus" (Gandini, 2003), "The Corporation" (Abbott, 2004), "Maxed Out" (Scurlock, 2006) and "The True Cost" (Fox, 2016). According to Spyros Zonakis (2018), Elisabeth Laville, founder and chief entrepreneur of UTOPIES, states *our addiction to consumption is, without a doubt, the biggest taboo of our*

modern societies, we keep consuming more, convinced that consumption is the key to our individual happiness. However, the opposite happens.

This paper concludes with the view that brand addiction comprises facets that may diminish the promise of marketing by limiting freedom of choice and sovereignty, ultimately affecting consumers' well-being. Therefore, it should not be equated with other relational constructs like brand passion, brand liking and brand love, which are effective tools for satisfying consumer needs sustainably. Future research should investigate whether brand addiction is a voluntary relationship between brands and consumers. What factors drive consumers to become brand addicts? What are the other adverse outcomes of brand addiction? How can marketing managers ensure that other forms of relationships like brand love and brand passion do not transform into brand addiction? What strategies can be employed to address brand addiction? What values and experiences can brands offer to help brand addicts overcome their addiction?

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### Further reading

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