

# Operationalising Brand Addiction: A Proposed Conceptual Framework

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## **Abstract:**

Brand addiction as a key construct of consumer-brand relationship is gaining ground owing to its significant effect on a firm's marketing success. Despite acceptance of the long-term effects of brand addiction, the conceptualization and understanding of the construct needs better articulation. Delimiting pure brand addiction from a nested product-brand addiction model, the present paper attempts to systematize the definition and framework of brand addiction in case of the former with an objective assessment of literature. The conceptual model identifies brand addiction as the higher order construct of consumer brand relationship as opposed to other constructs like brand liking, brand attachment, brand love, brand passion and brand loyalty. Operationally the model contributes by highlighting the concepts of addictive consumption and brand dependence as a consequence of brand addiction that could lead to absolute brand loyalty and ensure sustainable long-term brand performance.

*Keywords: Brand Addiction, Consumer-Brand Relationship, Conceptual Model*

*Track: Product and Brand Management*

# **Operationalising Brand Addiction: A Proposed Conceptual Framework**

## **1. Introduction**

Marketers have long been studying the role and importance of establishing a meaningful relationship with the consumer as a prerequisite for marketing success. The reliance on ensuring customer satisfaction for the consumer of product or service in the earlier days of marketing were replaced by more enduring variants of connection or bond in the form of brand loyalty or other forms of brand attachment. Present day manifestations of divided loyalty or multi-brand loyalty (Felix, 2014) led marketers rethink on their approaches to create more stable consumer-brand relationships. Researchers investigating such consumer-brand relationship have explored several nuances of this engagement by drawing parallels with unidirectional interpersonal relationships (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Sarkar, 2011). Considering the dynamic connection between the brand and the consumer where the brand acts as an important part of the consumer's life like any other dyadic relationship of human beings, constructs like brand loyalty, brand commitment, brand love, etc. have been explored to enrich the consumer brand relationship literature.

In the same light, brand addiction as a key construct of consumer-brand relationship has gained decent traction in the recent years. Brand addiction unlike other addictions is devoid of overtly negative outcomes (Mrad, 2018) and may prove to be positive for the marketers in terms of its long-term effects in inducing consumption of the brand. Despite initial attempts to define and understand brand addiction, conceptually it remains ambiguous and overlapping with other related constructs with respect to consumer-brand relationships.

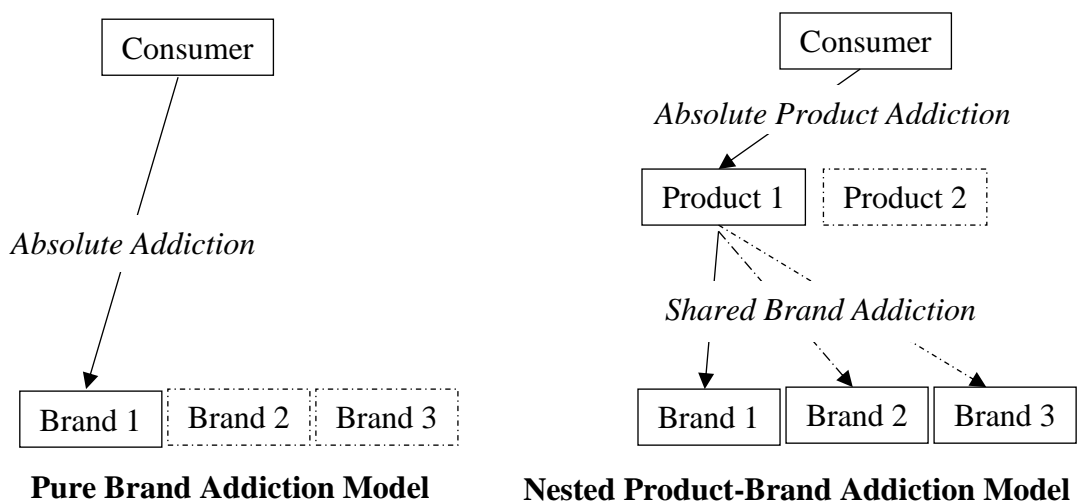
In this paper the authors attempt to build on the evolving consumer-brand relationship literature to develop a conceptual framework on the possible effect of the consumer's brand addiction in impacting the success and sustainability of a firm. The exploratory paper attempts to address two important research questions:

- How is brand addiction conceptually different from other established consumer-brand relationship constructs?
- What are the probable antecedents that are responsible for the manifestation and what could be the likely outcomes of brand addiction?

## **2. Theoretical Foundation**

### *2.1 Defining brand addiction*

The evolving definition of brand addiction considers it as *a psychological state that entails an emotional attachment to a particular brand, driven by compulsive urges that provide pleasure* (Cui, Mrad, and Hogg, 2018; Mrad, 2018). It signifies an intensely loyal relationship with high levels of dependency and reliance. Brand addiction creates strong perception of non-substitutability among consumers and determines the well-being of the consumer (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). Here, it may be recalled that addiction as described by the American Psychological Association refers to substance abuse related to drug or alcohol. Yet, emerging definitions of addiction include pathological behaviours or activities (Young, 2009) like shopping or exercising that may be more apt in describing the phenomenon of brand addiction. Interestingly, addiction in case of brands refers to a ‘strong appetite’ for the consumption of the brand that is devoid of harmful effects (Mrad, 2018) and may be viewed as an opportunity for marketers looking at creating long-term sustainable relationships with their consumers by ensuring their well-being.



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Figure 1. Understanding Brand Addiction: Varied Approaches

In order to operationalize the definition of brand addiction, it is important to draw a useful understanding on the difference between product addiction and brand addiction. While product addiction could well be considered within the purview of pure substance intake, brand addiction relates to behavioural consequences around brand consumption. However, product addiction can serve as a precursor to brand addiction in the form of a nested logic (see Figure 1). To illustrate with an example a consumer’s addiction to dark chocolate may be considered as a form of product addiction that could well serve as an antecedent to his addiction with a

particular chocolate brand like Lindt. Hence, the nature and outcome of a *pure brand addiction model* would be different from that of a *nested product-brand addiction model*. In case of pure brand addiction, the consumer-brand relationship will essentially be governed by the self-brand congruity, in place of a strong compulsive individual-product connect for product addiction. For an Apple iPhone addict, his preoccupation with the brand is governed by his strong connect with the brand identity of iPhone and not that of smartphones. On the other hand, a nested product-brand addiction model that starts with product addiction would still have to consider possibilities of a brand switch by the consumers at the nested level in effect of marketing activities by competing brand. For a dark chocolate addict, there could be possible switch from a Lindt to a Bagatchi or a Zevic owing to better availability, price promotion or guided by simple variety seeking intent. In this case, as the congruence of such brand addiction will be shared by substitutable brands in the same product family it may not result in absolute loyalty.

## 2.2 Differentiating brand addiction

The consumer-brand relationship or the brand relationship quality (BRQ) for a consumer refers to his strong emotional and motivational connect with the brand (Kim, Park, and Kim, 2014). This may be manifested as affective attachments in the form of brand love or brand passion and as behavioural elements such as brand commitment and cognitive beliefs of trust and intimacy. Brand literature has enough evidence with regards brand liking, brand attachment, brand love, brand passion, brand loyalty and brand trust. The constructs have been conceptually formalized and empirically tested to develop myriad theories of consumer-brand relationship (Cui, Mrad, and Hogg, 2018; Mrad & Cui, 2017; Kim, Park, and Kim, 2013; Sarkar, 2011). However, these constructs differ in terms of their relative position in the continuum of intensity of such relationship (Mrad, 2018).

Interestingly, while most constructs have a behavioural component the construct of brand trust primarily refers to the attitudinal position of the consumer (refer Table 1). Considering the primary behavioural constructs, it is clarified that brand addiction is established as a higher order construct of consumer brand relationship. Scored against the degree of intimacy and exclusivity of feeling for the brand (refer Figure 2) brand liking marks the onset of a strong consumer brand relationship. Positive evaluation of the brand and initial affective positive emotion characterises brand liking that has the propensity to develop into a more exclusive relationship with the brand in the form of brand loyalty. Here, the loyalty is backed by liking and the consumer's positive comprehension associated with the 'like'. Loyalty turns

out to be more exclusive as it is marked by recurrence of purchase of the same brand, yet the relationship remains more rational than emotional in such cases. A loyal Walmart consumer would be prone to buying from Walmart driven by his rational considerations on the price offer or location or merchandise depth. However, his emotional intimacy may remain low despite his recurrent purchases. On the other hand, initial brand liking could also develop into more intimate consumer-brand relationship in the form of brand attachment, followed by brand love and brand passion in the same order as the consumer develops a strong personal connection with the brand. Attachment, love or passion need not be exclusive like in the case of interpersonal relationships as the person may be attached to multiple persons among his family, peers, friends that may be important for his social existence and dissatisfaction may lead to dissolution or disengagement with the relationship (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). As the consumer progresses from his state of attachment to love and passion he tends to become more exclusive in terms of his choices. Nevertheless, in the light of hierarchy of effects perspective brand addiction is marked as the higher order construct of consumer brand relationship with the highest levels of intimacy and exclusivity. Thus, the authors would like to define brand addiction as an *obsessive-compulsive attachment with a brand that manifests itself as craving and dependence on the brand. This converts into absolute brand loyalty that is reflected in acquisition of brand information as well as brand purchase.*

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Deconstruction Logic</b>
Brand liking	An evaluative and global measurement capturing how positive and strong the perceived brand assets are from a consumer perspective (Anselmsov et al, 2008)	Positive perception may not involve high levels of intimacy and undivided loyalty
Brand loyalty	A deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product/ service consistently in the future thereby causing repetitive same brand or same brand-set purchasing despite situation influences and marketing efforts to cause switching behaviour (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)	Deep commitment to patronise with minimal propensity to switch, hence exclusive commitment may be driven by rational motivation rather than emotional connect
Brand attachment	Strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self (Park et al., 2010)	Strong personal connection increases level of intimacy but is likely to be shared by a host of brands
Brand love	Degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied customer has for a trademarked brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006)	Strong emotional connect justifies high degrees of intense feeling that is supported by initial brand liking

Brand passion	A psychological construct comprised of excitation, infatuation and obsession for a brand (Albert et al., 2013)	Strong obsessive intimacy may be shared with a host of brands in the brand family
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Table 1. Consumer Brand Relationships: Related Constructs & Critique

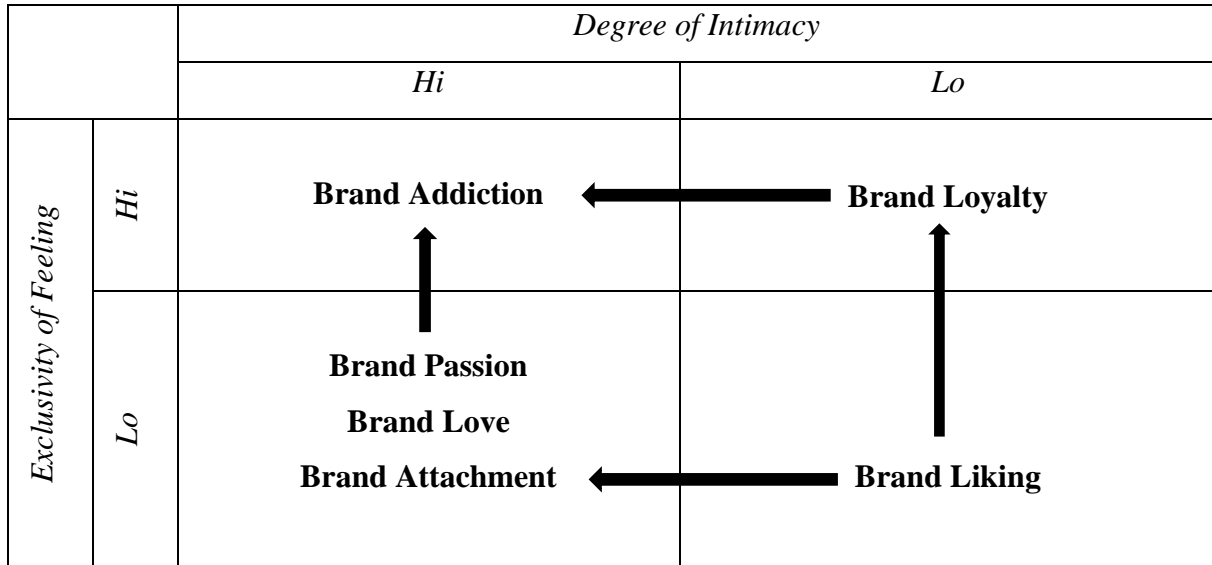


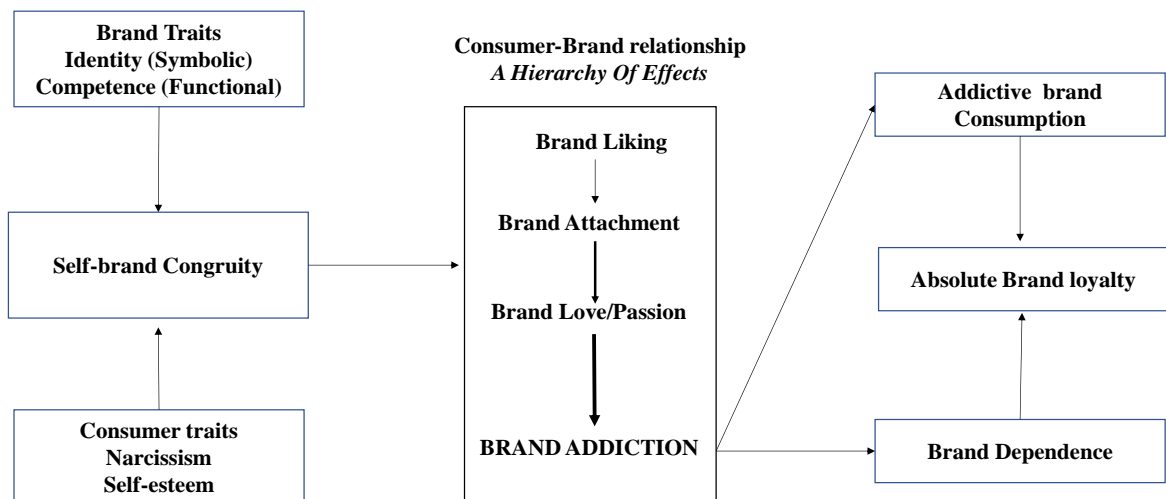
Figure 2. Intimacy-Exclusivity Matrix of Consumer Brand Relationships: A Hierarchy of Effects

### 3. Brand Addiction: Conceptual Framework

In the context of the consumer brand relationship constructs, brand addiction is established as a higher order construct that may have significant effect in sustaining long term relationship between the consumer and the brand. Brand addiction cannot be imposed but can be supported by the marketer through aligned marketing activities. The authors based on an extant review of contemporary branding literature postulate a framework that examines key antecedents that lead to brand addiction and the likely outcomes of the phenomenon (refer Figure 3).

Strong brand characteristics in the form of a symbolic brand identity (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Kapferer, 2008) and functional brand competence (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela et al., 2006) serve as an important trigger for consumers to choose a set of brands over others. Belk (1998) proposed that consumers seek to buy and own objects/ brands that they perceive as an extension of themselves. Here the concept of self-brand congruity becomes significant (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Taute, Sierra, Carter, and Maher, 2017). Thus, consumers choose brand that reflect *who they are*- actual self or *who they want to be*- ideal

self. For example, Rolex may be a chosen brand for a person who perceives himself to be disciplined and precise. Therefore, it is yearned and owned by the one who aspires to be perfect. Further, it is also important to recognise that consumers buy brands as a reflection of their personal achievement- like buying an Omega watch or a Harley Davidson bike- or as an object that signifies their exclusive group membership (Taute, Sierra, Carter, and Maher, 2017). Individuals who seeks to boost their self-esteem (Sirgy, 1982; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger, 2011) are more likely to seek self-brand congruity (Helm, Renk, and Mishra, 2016). The second individual trait that propels consumer-brand relationships is narcissism. These individuals have a heightened sense of self-esteem and are active seekers of material objects (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Brands serve as ideal means of satisfying desire, where undertaking branded or sometimes exclusive purchases helps them to stand out. The unique value of the brand matches and therefore elevates their self-perceptions in the process.



Source: Author Created

Figure 3. Brand Addiction: A Proposed Conceptual Framework

The second section of the framework proposes a phased consumer-brand relationship that proposes a hierarchy of effects (discussed earlier in the paper) where the relationship between the consumer and brand begins with liking and culminates into addiction. The thickness of the arrows visible in the progression indicate the strengthening of the bond between the consumer and his/her favoured brand. For example, the established brand identity of Marvel and its consistent delivery of the Marvel magic through its franchise induce consumers to like, attach, love and finally be addicted to the brand irrespective of even the product characteristics. The addicted consumer of Marvel does not just end up watching movies and buying Marvel merchandise, he/she voluntarily develops a constant preoccupation with the brand with an



insatiable desire to stay connected and updated with all that is happening around Marvel. Brand addiction, unlike other consumer-brand relationship establishes the supremacy of the brand in the relationship that posits a lack of control culminating into an irresistible craving for the brand. Therefore such addiction evidently results in addictive consumption (Elliott, 1994; James & Drennan, 2005) and brand dependence (Fajer & Schouten, 1995) that lead to absolute brand loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011). Here, one needs to understand the distinction between loyalty and absolute brand loyalty. An absolute form of brand loyalty would mean more exclusive engagement of the consumer in the form of highest level of brand commitment. At this stage the consumers are not open to any other brand being part of their consideration set. The relationship is an 'all or nothing', where the consumer favours non-consumption rather than an alternative brand. Thus, the loop of addiction to loyalty takes on a cyclic connotation that reduces the possibility of the consumer seeking other brands in that category.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Satisfying customers may be of utmost importance for marketers but for long term sustainability of the firm's marketing success building relationships with customers play a more significant and important role. Marketers build brands to establish associations that help in strengthening consumer-brand relationship that bring in long term sustainability. This takes on an added meaning in today's world that is marked by fragmented human relationships, a sense of lowered self-esteem, competency and rising materialistic consumption (Fournier & Richins, 1991). This preoccupation with inanimate and material objects is a phenomenon of both the developed (Palmer, 2006) and developing world (Das, 2017).

In this context, the paper though exploratory and conceptual in form attempts to comprehend a relatively unexplored phenomenon of brand addiction as a measure to create long lasting relationships between the brand and its consumer. In its initial discourse, the authors try to add to the nascent literature by demarcating the realm of brand addiction from other forms of consumer-brand relationship constructs. The operational definition of brand addiction developed with the theoretical grounding highlights the possible positive and negative outcomes in the form of addictive consumption, brand dependence and absolute brand loyalty. Though it may appear in the short term that all three states or consequences work towards the success and sustainability of the brand, the paper initiates the thought of exploring the dark sides of brand addiction that may be associated with these outcomes. The

framework hints that the most productive and positive use of the brand addiction phenomenon opens the possibility of steering the absolute brand loyalty to brand evangelism which would be productive from the consumer as well as the brand's perspective. The framework serves as the basis for further exploration in the domain to help marketers and researchers with useful framework and insights.

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