Brand addiction: Exploring the concept and its definition through an experiential lens☆

Charles Chi Cui[a,*], Mona Mrad[b], Margaret K. Hogg[c]

[a] The University of Manchester, Booth Street West, Manchester M15 6PB, United Kingdom
[b] Lebanese American University, P.O. Box 13-5053, Chouran, Beirut, Lebanon
[c] Lancaster University Management School, Charles Carter Building, D42, Lancaster LA1 4YX, United Kingdom

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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

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

consumers' experiences that are hard to examine (McGrath, Sherry, & Levy, 1993). Hence, projective techniques are used by researchers for verifying or modifying prior findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mick, Demoss, & Faber, 1992; Patton, 2002). For the nineteen in-depth interviews, 10 males (average age 25) and 9 females (average age 20), with graduate and postgraduate education, were recruited after the focus-group analysis. This number of participants is in line with typical projective studies that prioritize qualitative richness over statistical power (Levy, 1985; Mick et al., 1992). Similar to the recruitment criteria for focus groups, individuals were recruited with the criterion that they should already have expressed a strong attachment to a particular brand.

The sentence completion method of projective techniques was employed first, since it taps into the depth of the participants' feelings (Gordon & Langmaid, 1988; Green, 1984), emotions and perceptions (Cotte & Latour, 2009). The participants were given a set of incomplete sentence stems. They were then asked to think about themselves as another person who was a brand addict, and think about how that brand addicted person would complete the sentences (the set of incomplete sentences can be viewed in Appendix B).

A construction task was also used. Here, third person questioning was employed since complex and cognitive activities are needed to elicit individuals' information about brand addiction (Lindzey, 1959), and this task also helped participants respond freely about other people's actions, feelings or attitudes (Steinman, 2009). Participants were asked to project themselves onto a brand addict and articulate what this person would think (or do) according to a set of open-ended questions based on the salient characteristics of a brand addict (e.g., what are the things that would indicate that this person is a brand addict?), what might lead to the brand addiction (e.g., what are the factors or motivations that may cause this person to become a brand addict?), and what might be the outcome (e.g., what will happen as a result of this person's addiction?). Finally, a word association task (e.g., Donoghue, 2000) was used, in which participants were shown cards with phrases related to the eleven features of brand addiction found from the focus groups, and participants were asked to rank-order whether or not they felt the characteristic represented the case of a brand addicted person, of a person who was less of a brand addict, or not a brand addicted person at all.

The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, and they were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcribed data was content analyzed using a close iterative reading qualitative procedure (McGrath et al., 1993; Mick et al., 1992) and the constant comparison technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to categorize the themes. The first two authors individually analyzed all the data texts and then discussed the evolving interpretations, challenging each other, and ultimately jointly forging the holistic interpretations.

4. Findings

Through the analysis of the focus-group and projective interview data, inferences were drawn to generate insights, patterns, themes, and connections that characterized the meaning of brand addiction (Spiggle, 1994). The analyses yielded eleven salient properties of brand addiction described in detail below.

4.1. Acquisitiveness

The study revealed that brand addicted consumers tend to think obsessively about obtaining everything created and produced by the brands to which they are addicted, even if they do not need these items and would be unlikely to use them in the near future. Buying the brand's products is thus provoked not by the need for the product but instead by the drive to acquire the items of the addictive brand. For instance, Mary believed that one of the things indicating a brand addict was when a person bought things that were not needed. Emile

mentioned the following about his brother: "He bought the Hugo Boss tuxedo and he ended up not wearing it, but he had to buy it because it's Hugo Boss", revealing a state of indulgence whereby the obsession with particular brands is what makes brand addicts willing to buy products from the brand, even if they do not need them and are not going to use them in the near future.

Brand addicts try hard to possess the highest percentage of items from their addictive brand. For instance, Willy reported that 70% of his athletic wardrobe was from Nike and he would not be happy to buy a competitor's brand such as Adidas. This tendency seems to show an acquisitive motive because an individual obtains a greater degree of satisfaction from their obsessive engagement with the brand rather than the brand necessarily meeting a particular functional need. This acquisitiveness feature is not the same as that of compulsive buyers in that compulsive buyers' addictive drive is about shopping and spending rather than the possession of or attachment to a particular brand, and compulsive buyers often even struggle to name a favorite brand (Horváth & Birgelen, 2015).

4.2. Bonding

Brand addicts tend to feel a sense of bonding with the addictive brand. This is manifested in a close psychological connection through frequent and constant association with the brands that are considered as the person's comfort zone, community, or imaginary friend. According to Emily, a brand addict "feels connection with this brand as if you're connected to a certain family that is external to your [usual] comfort zone, not your parents, not your family, it's a community you're connected to". Some participants indicated their readiness to support their favorite brands financially. For example, Thomas claimed that he invested in Apple and was committed to it, with no consideration of whether or not the share price would rise or fall. He also mentioned that even if he lost money, he would keep investing in Apple. His purpose in investing in Apple was to help Apple in their research and development. Another example is Grace, who reported that her obsession with the Monki brand led her to support the brand to the extent that she was willing to join the company and apply for an internship with them. These examples indicate that brand addicted consumers have a strong bond with their particular brands to the extent that they are willing to support them and treat them as part of their families or communities.

4.3. Brand exclusiveness

This study shows that brand addicts limit their consideration sets to their addictive brands, and omit other brands from their consideration set. Thus, these individuals become single minded and prejudiced in favor of the addictive brand, disregarding all other brands, focusing only on the addictive brands, and seeing no other brands as better, regardless of price differences. Thus, according to Tracy, brand addicts become focused on the brand to the extent that this brand "might not be the best brand, but you won't be convinced that it's not the best brand. You'll probably be missing [out] on other things but you won't know". Additionally, the extreme obsession of brand addicts leads them to "get angry if others talk negatively about it".

Brand addicts also tend to be extremely focused on a particular brand so that they become price insensitive, and unwilling to substitute the products of the addictive brand with other brands even when analogous products are available at a lower price from a different brand. According to Emma, "a brand addict …tries something and he likes it, and it will be hard for him to like something else even if the price is lower". Another participant, Thomas (an Apple addict) stated that he would readily pay not only double the price but also triple the price to get an Apple computer. He further stated that even if Microsoft offered the same things as Apple, he would still pick Apple. Finally, for a brand addict, brand exclusiveness can also be manifested in brand sensitivity, meaning that a brand addict can immediately recognize the

cues of the addictive brand. Thus, when seeing anything related to the brand, this person will "freak out when small changes are done by the brand", as Emma stated.

4.4. Collection

This study found brand addicts tend to possess a collection of products from the addictive brand. For instance, Willy indicated that the shirt he was wearing and the shoes he owned were all from the Nike brand. He confessed that he was so addicted to the brand that if he did not have the right shoes from the Nike Plus he would not do his running exercises. Sarah, an addict of Prada, reported that she had almost all colors, ranging from orange to red, black, white and red, dark blue, and off-white in her Prada collection. According to Jennifer, a brand addict "just keeps buying buying buying buying this product. Like whenever for example, you love this brand that gives you this T-shirt, you'll buy whatever 5, 6, 7, 10 [of the] same T-shirt".

The literature on collecting is diverse. Nordsletten and Mataix-Cols (2012) argue that collecting behavior shares many of the core features of hoarding; collecting is generally considered a normative form of object amassment. "For the majority of collectors, a diagnosis of Hoarding Disorder is likely to be effectively ruled out" (p. 165). There is a view that "items acquired for the purposes of building a collection are not sufficient to constitute a hoard" (Frost, Krause, & Steketee, 1996, p. 122, cited in Nordsletten & Mataix-Cols, 2012, p. 167). On the other hand, hoarding is broadly defined as an excessive form of acquisition. Drawing on Nordsletten and Mataix-Cols (2012), we opt for the term "collection" instead of "hoard" to avoid unduly pathologizing brand addictive behavior.

4.5. Compulsive urges

This study revealed that brand addicts tend to have irresistible desires to get the addictive brand. Daniel, for example, mentioned that being so obsessed with one brand "feels like this person is obliged to buy this brand". Alice stated that her addiction was manifested in the way that she could not avoid entering her favorite brand's shop whenever she was passing by, although she might have been there only the day before. She also stated that she could not control herself from continuously checking the company's website, on at least a daily basis. These quotes illustrate that brand addicts have the continuous urge to perform activities related to their addictive brands, not unlike other forms of addictive behaviors (e.g., internet addiction, compulsive buying). This finding is consistent first with the characteristics identified by Hirschman (1992) i.e., the drive, impulse or urge to engage in addictive behavior. And second, with the subsequent theoretical explanation that when motivation-reward and affect regulation are impaired, urges to engage in the activation of the reward system are extraordinarily difficult to resist in addictive behaviors (Goodman, 2008).

4.6. Dependence

Dependence refers to both affective and cognitive experiences, for example, submissiveness to the urge and desire to possess the addictive brands. Some participants reported that it would be hard for them to live without their addictive brands: "a brand addict in general feels submissive to the brand" (Adam, a projective interviewee). For instance, Thomas stated that his addiction was getting to the point where "… Apple, I can't live without it". He admitted that he was addicted to Apple to the extent that all the technology products he had were from Apple, listing his iPhone, iPod and iPad. Sarah stated that she would not be able to continue her life without having access to the Clinique brand, emphasizing that she was highly attached to the benefits she got from this brand and it would be hard for her to lose them. The phenomena described here may be explained by individuals' cognitive confidence and trust in the utility function of the products of the brands, as well as

by their high emotional attachment to the brands. This dependence feature reflects one of the most common characteristics of addictive behaviors, i.e. the irresistible urge to repeatedly engage in the behavior (Miele, Tilly, First, & Frances, 1990; Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2017).

4.7. Financial management vs. debt tolerance

From the data, two different attitudes towards finance were identified and linked to brand addiction. The first tendency is "financial management" and can be defined as the brand addicts' tendency to spend all their income on the brand, and if necessary waiting until they can next afford to buy the addictive brand either by saving money or by working very hard to earn sufficient money. Indeed, none of the focus-group participants reported that they would incur any debt in order to purchase their addictive brands. For instance, when the moderator asked how the participants would act if they did not have enough money to purchase their addictive brands, both Lynn and Barbara formed a consensus on not visiting the brand's shop until they had more money. Similarly, Silva reported that if she found something that she really liked, she would save her money and cut out other things until she was able to afford the item she liked from her addictive brand. It seems that when facing financial constraints, some brand addicts tend to have the rational capacity for self-control, and their purchase of the addictive brand items is not totally driven by impulsiveness. It could be that this view might only be a reflection of a socially desirable collective story entailed by the group setting. It may be that (1) some brand addicts do not overspend on a particular brand; (2) some brand addicts overspend, but this tendency was not represented by our focus group participants; or (3) due to social desirability and the group setting, some participants did not want to admit to overspending.

The other attitude towards finance arising from this study's findings and more specifically from projective interviews, is "debt tolerance", defined as the tendency to borrow money from family/friends or financial institutions to buy the addictive brand. The projective interviews show unanimous agreement that getting into debt typifies a brand addict. An extreme form of debt tolerance would be a person's tendency to take out loans in order to buy the addictive brands without ensuring they have the capability to repay the loan. For instance, during the projective technique interviews, Kirsty stated that a brand addict would "get a loan, like be paying debts for his entire life to get it. He will do anything to get it". This suggests that getting into debt may be one aspect of brand addiction.

4.8. Gratification

In this study, brand addicts tended to reveal feelings of pleasure and relief derived from possessing the addictive brands and from engaging in activities related to the addictive brands. For example, Clara stated that a brand addict "tries to do his best to satisfy, especially the addiction." In this way, the person "will feel a sort of happiness! Especially if he gets it". Carmen, another respondent, revealed that her addiction to the Valentino brand made her feel so satisfied and happy when purchasing the brand's shoes: "I feel so satisfied every time I just wear this shoe over and over again. Definitely, I would love to buy a new one but also it makes me happy wearing this one all the time. You can imagine this feeling when you are wearing your favorite brand".

Other respondents believe that in the case of addiction to brands, the satisfaction with the quality of the brands that accompanies their desire either to engage with or possess a particular brand is what makes people feel the urge to repetitively buy from the same brand. In contrast, in the case of compulsive buying, gratification takes the form of enhanced mood and states and these last only for a short period of time (Faber & Christenson, 1996). This form of gratification is what pushes individuals to repeat the behavior in the future. Contrary to compulsive buying and other forms of addiction, brand addiction seems to involve a more prolonged state of gratification rather than a fleeting one.

Addiction for compulsive buyers means gratification from mood repair via shopping/spending, while brand addicts' gratification comes from satisfaction with the brands.

4.9. Irritability

Brand addicts tend to feel anxious when they are unable to engage in activities related to the addictive brand. This characteristic may seem to be common to other addictive behaviors (Goodman, 1990) such as compulsive buyers who experience a mounting tension and feelings of anxiety or nervousness when they felt the need to spend and they were unable to do so (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992). Olivia reported how attached she was to the Mac cosmetic brand. She narrated how badly she had felt when they discontinued a mascara she used to continuously buy, saying in lowered tones, to show her sadness: "I feel I would probably cry". Jacob, another respondent, also reported that his friend became anxious and stressed when he could not get ahold of his favorite brand, Ralph Lauren. Once they were in Rome together, and although his friend had run out of clothes, he wasn't prepared to wear anything other than Ralph Lauren and made his whole group of friends search for the Ralph Lauren shop to buy new items. These examples indicate that brand addicts may experience frustration and anxiety when they are unable to acquire a certain brand or be involved in activities related to the brand. However, we should note that, while for compulsive buyers anxieties come originally from other distressing factors in life before the intention to shop occurs (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992), for brand addicts anxieties arise from the urge to possess the brands.

4.10. Mental and behavioral preoccupation

Seeking satisfaction and comfort through both hedonic and utilitarian attributes, brand addicts tend to show excessive interest and commitment in performing activities related to the addictive brand over the long term. Brand addicts are thus found to be preoccupied with a continuous mental engagement with the brand whereby they keep performing activities related to the addictive brand over time, such as continuously following the news about the addictive brand. Peter (an Apple addict) stated that Apple Safari was the only browser on his MacBook and he read the Apple website every day. He was obsessed with the Apple brand to the extent that he knew that September 10th was the release date for the new iPhone. Delia described how passionate she was about her beloved brand to the extent that she would always go to the store and ask salespeople about different fabrics, material uses and the manufacturing process.

This characteristic reflects a mental state of obsessive preoccupation with one's beloved brand, resulting in ever engrossing thoughts about and sustained affectional bonds with one's beloved brands. Thus, as one respondent mentioned, those individuals will feel that "they'll live, feel, breathe and dream about this brand". For example, Lynn, a Fendi addict, reported that whenever she went to Piccadilly Gardens (a high-end street with numerous retail stores in a large northern city of the U.K.), she always had to visit the Fendi store because it made her feel happy. Moreover, brand addicts tend to have some "expectation fulfillment" described in terms of strong feelings of satisfaction derived from the things offered by the addictive brand. According to Amanda, "they [brand addicts] like the quality of it and they like having more of the brand they're addicted to." As such, brand addicts tend to have expectations about the quality, design, and superiority of the brand; the variety of the offerings, products and services; and positive brand experiences.

4.11. Word of mouth

Brand addicts are willing to strongly defend the brand image in all possible cases and encourage others to buy the addictive brand. The focus group participants stated that addiction to particular brands included exerting pressure on other people and trying to convince and influence others to try and/or buy products from the same addictive brands. This tendency to influence others about the addictive brand may be an extreme form of word of mouth behavior. Jim argued, for example, that his brother was so addicted to Hugo Boss that his brother always persuaded him to buy products from Hugo Boss. Jim said that, even if he bought Versace, his brother would not accept it… [and]… because of his brother, Jim became an addict to Hugo Boss as well. Carol, a L'Occitane brand addict, reported that she was not a natural salesperson; however, for her addictive brand, she was capable of selling it to anyone, and she tried to convince people to buy the brand. Natasha stated that "the way he's talking to you is like trying to convince you to buy a specific brand, because this brand suits him and he likes it more than others so he tries to influence you." These findings reveal that brand addiction leads to influencing others to buy the brand one is addicted to.

5. Conceptualization of brand addiction

5.1. The concept structure

A concept may be identified by a set of the most salient attributes singularly necessary and collectively sufficient for demonstrating an instance of the concept (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016; Sartori, 1984). The concept of brand addiction has fuzzy and complex features, and such concepts are not amenable to definition in terms of necessary and sufficient criteria (Batra et al., 2012; Fehr, 2006) but are best defined by prototypes (Batra et al., 2012; Rosch, 1973; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). A prototype shows a set of features representing the best, most representative, most typical example of the category (Fehr, 2006; Shaver et al., 1987). "Individual objects vary in their degree of similarity or 'family resemblance' to the prototype — the degree to which they are good examples of the category" (Shaver et al., 1987, p. 1062). According to the family-resemblance concept structure, the presence of some combination (but not necessarily all) of the eleven features reported earlier identifies brand addiction or a brand addict. For the current paper, we adopt Medin's (1989) principle, integrated from an alternative similarity model and psychological essentialism, which takes account of the role of theory in defining a concept. Accordingly, we propose the theoretical prototypes at the level of the eleven salient properties of brand addiction, and their resemblance to manifestations of brand addiction is substantiated by the prototypical dimensions of addiction from Sussman and Sussman (2011) and Martin et al. (2013) (see Table 2).

Sussman and Sussman's (2011) five criteria elements of addictive behavior include feeling different, preoccupation with the behavior, temporary satiation, loss of control and negative consequences. Martin et al.'s (2013) four key dimensions of addiction in consumption are time spent and frequency of engaging in the behavior, degree of self-control exerted by the individual (self-control is characterized by a non-volitional focus on the process of delayed gratification of certain needs or impulses), enjoyment of the behavior, and degree of the negative consequences of harmful outcomes manifested in terms of psychological, economic, physical and/or social dimensions. This resulted in the five dimensions (shown in Table 2) by retaining the unique dimensions (e.g., "enjoyment" from Martin et al., 2013 and "feeling different" from Sussman & Sussman, 2011) and integrating the common dimensions. Sussman and Sussman's (2011) "temporary satiation" does not seem to be directly related to any of the essential features in our findings. Hence, this is not shown as a prototypical dimension in Table 2. The highlighted features (shown by the symbol x) under each dimension demonstrate the typicality of the features in the conceptual domain of brand addiction. All the multiple attributes are associated with theoretical dimensions, which support the conceptual domain adequacy for brand addiction. In practice, the greater the number of attributes that are identifiable in a behavior, the more prototypical the behavior is of

Table 2
Prototypical features of brand addiction.

Properties	Feeling different (Sussman & Sussman, 2011)	Enjoyment (Martin et al., 2013)	Time spent & frequency (Martin et al., 2013; Sussman & Sussman, 2011)	Self-control (Sussman & Sussman, 2011; Martin et al., 2013)	Negative consequences (Martin et al., 2013; Sussman & Sussman, 2011)
Acquisitiveness Brand addicted consumers tend to have persistent thoughts about getting everything created and produced by their addictive brands even if they do not have the need for them and are not going to use them in the near future.	x	x	x	x	
Bonding Close psychological connection through frequent and constant association with the addictive brands that are considered as within the person's comfort zone, community, and imaginary friends.	x		x		
Brand exclusiveness Single mindedness and often unfair prejudice in favor of the brand, disregarding all other brands, focusing only on the addictive brands and seeing no other brands as better, regardless of price differences.	x		x	x	x
Collection The tendency to possess a cumulative collection of the addictive brand's products	x		x	x	x
Compulsive urges Irresistible desires to get the addictive brand.	x			x	x
Dependence An affective and cognitive experience of submissiveness to the urge for and desire to possess the addictive brands.	x			x	
Financial management vs. debt tolerant "Financial management" defined as the brand addicts' tendency to spend all their income on the brand, but usually always waiting until they can afford to buy the addictive brand either, by saving money or by working very hard to earn sufficient money. "Debt tolerant" is defined as the tendency to borrow money from family/friends or financial institutions to buy the addictive brand without necessarily having any plan about how this debt might be repaid.	x				
Gratification Feelings of pleasure and relief derived from possessing the addictive brands and engaging in activities related to the addictive brands (a positive "irreflexive affect" in psychological terms).	x	x			
Irritability Feeling anxious when unable to engage in activities related to the addictive brands.	x			x	x
Mental and behavioral preoccupation Seeking satisfaction and comfort through hedonic and utilitarian attributes; showing excessive interest in and commitment to performing activities related to the addictive brand over the long-term.	x	x	x	x	x
Word of mouth Strongly defending the brand image in all possible cases and encouraging others to buy the addictive brand.	x	x	x		

brand addiction.

5.2. Defining brand addiction

A definition should capture the essential salient attributes of the concept under consideration, be parsimonious (Suddaby, 2010), and make clear the scope conditions (types of circumstances and levels of analysis, temporal scope conditions, and assumptions or world view of the researcher) under which the concept operates. As Podsakoff et al. (2016) argue, "A good conceptual definition should identify the set of fundamental characteristics or key attributes that are common (and potentially unique) to the phenomenon of interest", so that it "clarifies the intension or meaning of the concept (Sartori, 1984) but also prevents the same concept from being used to refer to different phenomena …" (p.165). The eleven salient properties of brand addiction (shown in Table 2) provide strong empirical and theoretical grounds for developing a comprehensive definition of brand addiction, which is not limited to the emotional attributes but includes salient cognitive and behavioral attributes.

In this paper, brand addiction is conceptualized as a psychological state, which is supported by Sussman and Sussman's (2011) view that the essence of addiction is a certain brain state. The prototypical nature of the eleven essential features of brand addiction is consistent with Sussman and Sussman's (2011) four criteria elements and Martin et al.'s (2013) four key dimensions of addiction (see Table 2). As such, these essential features are applicable to the most prototypical brand addictive behavior (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2016). Hence, our definition is based on the following anchor points:

- Essential salient attributes: the eleven prototypical features from the focus-group and projective interview findings (shown in Table 2).
- Scope conditions: Individual consumers' (level of analysis) psychological states in daily life (circumstances and temporal scope) with potential (instead of necessary) negative consequences such as getting into debt (assumptions).

Using the above points as guidelines, we define brand addiction 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. This phenomenon is generally identifiable by the following eleven cognitive, affective and behavioral characteristics: acquisitiveness, bonding, brand exclusiveness, collection, compulsive urges, dependence, financial management versus debt tolerance, gratification, irritability, mental and behavioral preoccupation, and word of mouth. This prototype approach to defining brand addiction has the advantage of differentiating brand addicts and avoiding over simplification of this behavior. For example, if someone meets some prototypical features for being a brand addict but does not overspend or have other harmful outcomes, s/he can still be considered a brand addict. This definition provides an inclusive conceptual domain where some brand addicts may be harmed by their addiction and others may experience it as a healthy addiction (e.g., branded kits for fitness enthusiasts or specific shoe brands for running enthusiasts).

6. Brand addiction and other consumer-brand relationship concepts

In conceptual definitions, it is important to differentiate the defined concept from other related concepts in the field (Podsakoff et al., 2016). A recommended approach is to "take each defining attribute of the focal concept and think about whether it is also characteristic of the other related concepts" (Podsakoff et al., 2016, p.186). To this end, the eleven features of brand addiction are listed with other main consumer-brand relationship concepts in Table 3 and each feature is examined to see whether it is shared by other constructs. It can be seen from Table 3 that

in most cases no more than three features from the eleven features of brand addiction are shared by other consumer-brand relationship concepts; and the three features vary across the types of consumer-brand relationships. The exception is compulsive buying, which shares four features with brand addiction. There is a good level of evidence here that brand addiction is a distinct phenomenon and the combined essential features of the brand addiction concept are distinct from other consumer-brand relationship concepts. The small number of features of brand addiction shared by other concepts does not necessarily indicate a weakness in the conceptualization of brand addiction. Instead, such a small number of shared features illustrates the fuzzy conceptual boundaries of brand addiction. These fuzzy conceptual boundaries are also found in many other concepts in the behavioral and social sciences and psychology.

7. Discussion

Our first contribution is a definition of brand addiction (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, involving positive affectivity and gratification). The second contribution is the identification of the combination of eleven essential attributes of consumers' brand addiction: acquisitiveness, bonding, brand exclusivity, collecting, compulsive urges, dependence, financial management versus debt tolerance, gratification, irritability, mental and behavioral preoccupation, and word of mouth. Our findings suggest that consumer brand addiction may constitute a healthy addiction in some contexts. For example, some brand addicts may experience a psychological state of gratification accompanied by brand addictive behavior, feeling happy and gaining pleasure from their brand addictive behaviors (e.g., Anna describes her satisfaction because she believes that having the handbag from her favorite brand makes her feel satisfied to the extent that "I do feel complete when I have my bag"). This speculation is consistent with the views that consumer addictive behavior represents a synthesis of dependence (gratification of needs) and compulsion (evasion or avoidance of internal discomfort) (Goodman, 1990), and involves the attempt to achieve some appetitive effect and satisfaction that could have positive implications (Sussman & Sussman, 2011). Defining brand addiction in terms of prototypical features instead of its harmfulness leaves open the possibility that brand addiction is not necessarily harmful in all circumstances; instead, it might constitute a healthy addiction. This can be tested by future empirical research.

Contrary to some studies on compulsive buying, which show the severe impact on consumers' level of debt (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), our findings suggest that some brand addicts may get into debt while others may not. Our findings suggest that consumer brand addiction should be treated differently from other addictive behaviors, especially substance abuse. Except for the potential consequence of getting into debt from over-spending for some brand addicts, other features of brand addiction do not appear to lead to the pathological implications that are often found in other addictions. While supporting Fournier and Alvarez's (2012) claim that consumers who engage in close relationships with brands may show obsessive, addicted behavior with their addictive brands, our findings also suggest that brand addiction may not necessarily incur negative financial and/or psychological consequences in all cases. For some brand addicts who are capable financial managers, their brand addiction will not cause any harm, but may prove to be a healthy addictive behavior for their wellbeing.

Our third contribution is to show clear differences between brand addiction and other consumer-brand-relationship concepts. While there is some overlap between brand addiction, brand love and brand loyalty, our close examination of the essential features of brand addiction provides evidence that brand addiction is a distinctive phenomenon within consumer-brand relationships. The eleven features of brand addiction found in our study provide support for earlier researchers'

Table 3
Features of brand addiction and other related concepts.

Properties	Brand addiction	Brand love	Brand passion	Brand attachment	Brand liking	Brand trust	Brand loyalty	Compulsive buying
Acquisitiveness	x							x
Bonding	x	x		x				
Brand exclusiveness	x					x		
Collection	x							
Compulsive urges	x							x
Dependence	x		x					
Financial management vs. Debt tolerant	x							
Gratification	x	x	x	x				
Irritability	x							x
Mental and behavioral preoccupation	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Word of mouth	x							

views that brand addiction is the highest level of intense emotions between the consumer and the brand (e.g., Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998). Hence, uncovering the features of brand addiction offers valuable theoretical and managerial implications for marketing and consumer behavior researchers who are interested in understanding the different forms of relationships between the consumer and the brand. The findings of this study are also useful for marketing managers to classify their markets according to the different forms of intensity in consumer-brand relationships. This type of classification can provide useful access to and support for behavioral segmentation.

The essential features of brand addiction found in our study provide important clues about brand-addiction behavior identification and theorization of potential precipitating causes in different consumption contexts. Alexander's (2000) "substitute lifestyles" theory, for instance, postulates that an individual experiences psychosocial integration when the individual engages with a group and receives the group's understanding and acceptance of the individual. When people are consistently unable to achieve and maintain genuine psychosocial integration, they eventually construct lifestyles that substitute for it. "Whenever substitute lifestyles are the best adaptation that people are able to achieve, they cling to them with a tenacity that is properly called 'addiction' in the traditional sense of that term in the English language – whether drugs are involved or not" (Alexander, 2000, p. 503). Drawing on this view, it may be suggested that when consumers find a brand that functions as a "substitute lifestyle" they may cling to it with a tenacity that shows an addictive obsession.

According to Fiss' (2011) notion of neutral permutations, "within any given configuration, more than one constellation of different peripheral causes may surround the core causal condition, and the permutations do not affect the overall performance of the configuration" (p.398). This means that the combination of the core and peripheral causal elements may vary between different brand addicts who show similar addictive behavior. Some caution should be noted about the ontological position of brand addiction. Despite the tendency to relate the use of the term "addiction" to psychiatric disorder phenomena, the current research focuses on how the brand addiction phenomenon can contribute to a greater understanding of consumer behavior and marketing. Our findings do not suggest that the essential features of brand addiction meet the important criteria for diagnosing psychiatric disorders.

8. Conclusion and further research

In the current study, we have found important features of brand addiction from both focus groups and projective interviews. Using these salient features, we have developed a definition of brand addiction that could be used for a wide range of research into brand-addiction-related consumption phenomena. The contributions from this research are only a beginning and a great deal of empirical work remains to be done. Future research could take a number of directions.

1. Given the recent publication of a scale to measure the concept of brand addiction (Mrad & Cui, 2017), empirical tests will make it possible to examine whether brand addiction is conceptually and empirically different from other consumer-brand-relationship concepts.
2. Future research is recommended to explore and empirically test the antecedents and consequences of brand addiction in order to explore the generalizability of the findings from the current research. Establishing the relevant relationships among other types of addictive behaviors such as compulsive buying is also important to the development of a strong theoretical basis for brand addiction.
3. Understanding the behavioral consequences of brand addiction might yield some interesting insights into consumer behavior and addiction, allowing for further commonalities and differences across different types of addictive behaviors to be examined (Faber, Christenson, De Zwaan, & Mitchell, 1995). Hence, further research might examine the state of brand addiction in different contexts and across different brand categories, for instance, durables and services, to capture the behavioral features that are beyond the conceptual domain of the existing consumer-brand relationship concepts.
4. Future research should examine what positive and negative consequences may result from brand addiction in consumption experiences. For instance, Forrest (1979) notes that both positive and negative addictions occur on a continuum, and they do overlap in some respects. This suggests a fuzzy area in which the positive addictions can develop into pathological behaviors to varying degrees. Future research is recommended to explore under what conditions brand addiction may reach a pathological level with severe consequences for both the individual and the community.

Appendix A. An illustrative excerpt and analysis from the focus groups

What does brand addiction mean to you?
The moderator asked the participants what they thought an addiction to a brand meant. When the participants heard the term *addiction* for the first time during the discussion, they were silent for a few seconds, and then all burst out laughing. After laughing for some time, again a few seconds of silence occurred in the room, until Sarah, a participant in the group discussion, appeared to self-select herself. The self-selection, a form of turn taking, is defined by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) as a procedure during which a succeeding participant can self-select him-/herself to take the turn. Sarah used an example of one of the participants, Peter, who previously mentioned during the discussion that he had an attachment to Apple products and used all the iPhones that were released except for the first one. She mentioned that if she saw Peter

always carrying an iPhone, for her this meant that he was a fan of this brand. She then provided another example and referred to another participant, Jack. Sarah selected Jack as the next speaker by using adjacency pairs. She asked him about his name, and he answered her, thereby demonstrating the normative style of conversation among the participants. In addition, this revealed a form of discursive action through which Sarah invited another respondent who accepted her invitation to answer her question. Sarah continued by stating that, if she saw Jack wearing Hugo Boss all the time, she would infer that he was a follower of Hugo Boss (Hugo Boss is the brand that Jack revealed as his preference during the preceding discussion). Sarah further added that it was his trust of this brand that led him to wear it. Hence, from a conversation analysis perspective, Sarah was involved in a discursive interaction known as "inferential order talk". The inferential order talk is considered as the interpretative properties or things that people usually refer to in order to comprehend each other (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). This description of the selected excerpt indicates that, in order to provide evidence and factual information for her argument, Sarah tried to refer to some immediately noticeable actions that Jack might do in reference to the Hugo Boss brand. The vivid description of the argument revealed by Sarah was presented before eyewitnesses (i.e., focus group participants). What is particularly noticeable from this excerpt is that no consensus or disagreement was presented to comment on the argument presented by Sarah. As such, the analysis of this conversation leads to the inference that a person addicted to one particular brand tends to possess things related to that brand most of the time. It can also be inferred that the trust in a brand might lead the person to reveal such a repetitive behavior towards a specific brand.

Appendix B. Set of incomplete questions from projective techniques

1. A brand addict suffers from…
2. A brand addict is usually…
3. When a brand addict is faced with his/her addictive brand, he/she will…
4. A brand addict in general feels…
5. A brand addict differs from normal consumers in terms of…
6. A person becomes obsessed with a certain brand when…
7. A person starts influencing other people to buy a certain brand when…
8. A person who is willing to incur debt to buy products that he/she loves is…
9. A person possesses a collection of a certain brand's products because…
10. If a person cannot afford to buy the brand he/she likes, he/she will…
11. A major consequence of being a brand addict is…

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Charles Chi Cui is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) at Alliance Manchester Business School, the University of Manchester, UK. His research interests are in international marketing and cross-cultural behavior in consumption, with current focuses on addictive consumption, consumer-brand relationships, social inclusion in marketing, cross-cultural consumer values, and visual-perception in interactive marketing. He received the School Director's certification of "The Best Student Feedback" for teaching undergraduate Marketing Foundations in 2012–2013. He is Director of MSc Marketing and MSc Corporate Communications and Reputation Management at Alliance Manchester Business School. His current teaching includes International Marketing (MSc) and research methods courses (Critical Thinking, Social Research Methods, Advanced Survey Design) for PhD and DBA programs at Alliance Manchester Business School.

Mona Mrad is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Lebanese American University. She holds a PhD in Marketing from the University of Manchester, UK, an MBA and a BS in Marketing from LAU. She has also obtained a degree in fashion design from ESMOD and attended fashion courses at the London College of Fashion in the UK. She received the University of Manchester Faculty of Humanities Award for Distinguished Achievement in 2016. Her current research focuses on consumer behavior, consumer-brand relationships, and excessive buying behavior (fashion in particular). She was appointed as a guest lecturer teaching marketing research in Alliance Manchester Business School, and as a teaching assistant at the School of Materials, University of Manchester. She has taught Principles of Management, Principles of Marketing, Personal Selling and Sales Promotion, Consumer Behavior and Entrepreneurship. Her current teaching at LAU incudes fashion marketing, consumer behavior and principles of marketing at undergraduate and post-graduate levels.

Margaret K Hogg has held the Chair of Consumer Behaviour and Marketing in Lancaster University Management School (LUMS), U.K since 2004. Her principal research interests lie in the relationship between identity, self and consumption with a specific focus on the role of the negative self. She has been Associate Editor (Buyer Behavior) for the *Journal of Business Research* since 2013. She is one of the co-authors of the 6th European Edition of *Consumer Behaviour: A European Perspective* (2016, Pearson). She recently (2017) won the Student-led Teaching Award for Postgraduate Teaching/Supervision at Lancaster University. She is currently Director of Research and Deputy Head of the Marketing Department at LUMS.