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Brand Love and Brand Addiction and their Effects on Consumers' Negative Behaviors

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the relationship between brand love and brand addiction and their effects on consumers' negative behaviors with respect to excessive spending, trash-talking, and the feeling of anxiety.

Methodology: A sample of 352 young fashion brand consumers responded to a structured questionnaire. The resulting data were analyzed with structural equation modeling in MPlus.

Findings: While brand love and brand addiction are related concepts, their effects on negative consumer behaviors differ. In the presence of brand addiction as a mediator of brand love, brand addiction has a significant effect on the three negative behaviors, and we observe a suppression effect of brand love on the outcome variables, with total effects (direct and indirect) being insignificant.

Managerial Implications: While brand addiction could aid brands by leading consumers to spend excessively on them and trash-talk rival brands, it may also lead to increased consumer anxiety.

Limitations: The main limitation of this study was its single-country cross-sectional convenience sample.

Originality/value: This is the first study to empirically assess the relationship between brand love and brand addiction and their effects on three distinctive negative consumer behaviors. This shows that brand love is an important antecedent of brand addiction.

Keywords: Brand love; brand addiction; consumer anxiety; excessive spending; trash-talking.

1. Introduction

The contemporary market is an assemblage of brand options wherein consumers have as many choices as they wish. Each brand aspires to be consumers' first choice, as attaining that status is the only way to ensure long-term success for a brand. Following Fournier's (1998) brand relationship theory, many positive brand relationship constructs have been proposed and studied over the past few decades, such as admiration brand liking (Anselmsson *et al*., 2008), brand (Park, MacInnis, and Eisingerich, 2016), brand passion (Swimberghe *et al.*, 2014), and brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). These concepts are predominately associated with positive outcomes for companies and consumers alike. For companies, they are associated with higher brand loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), positive word-of-mouth (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), price premiums, and higher profits (Albert and Merunka, 2013). For consumers, these relationships are associated with increased desired self-identity and life meaning (Bagozzi, Batra, and Ahuvia, 2017) and overall subjective well-being (Junaid *et al*., 2019).

Emotions are the underlying drivers of these branding concepts where consumers can have a range of emotional reactions to a brand, from apparent affect to simple liking, casual affection, intense love, and addictive obsession (Fournier, 1998). The first to introduce the concept of brand hate were Mrad and Cui (2016, 2017). The literature on brand addiction is still nascent, and researchers are mostly focused on its conceptualization and operationalization (Bai *et al*., 2021). In fact, "there is some overlap between brand addiction [and] brand love […, a] close examination of the essential features of brand addiction provides evidence that brand addiction is a distinctive phenomenon within consumer-brand relationships" (Cui *et al*., 2018, p. 124). However, the literature has not empirically assessed the relationship between brand love and brand addiction.

Furthermore, addictive behavior is psychologically or physically destructive (Mendelson and Mello, 1996), and it hampers consumers' well-being (Belk *et al.*, 1996). To the best of the authors' knowledge, only one study empirically assesses consumers' negative outcomes of brand addiction and finds it leads to consumers feeling irritated and adopting obsessive and compulsive behaviors toward the brand (Francioni *et al*., 2020). On the other hand, building on positive addiction theory (Glasser, 1976), most studies so far have argued that brand addiction does not always result in negative consequences (Mrad and Cui, 2017). In fact, the findings of several empirical studies suggest positive outcomes for brand addiction, such as positive word-of-mouth, willingness to pay

a premium price (Le, 2020), self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Mrad and Cui, 2020). This dichotomy calls for more research about brand addiction..

Regarding the evolvement of brand love or brand addiction, Langner *et al*. (2016, p. 15) presented "a study designed to investigate and map the trajectories of brand love. [Where] consumers described experiences related to the initiation and evolution of their relationships with their most loved brand. […] The paths toward brand love followed five distinct trajectories, labeled as 'slow development,' 'liking becomes love,' 'love all the way,' 'bumpy road,' and 'turnabout.'" Further, "brand love leads to brand addiction" (Mrad and Cui, 2017, p. 1269). More recently, Le (2020, p. 1) indicated that brand addiction "refers to consumers' addictive behavior, with consumers particularly loving the brand." Examples of brand addictive behavior are provided by Cui *et al*. (2018, p. 121), who conducted a qualitative study based on focus-group and projective interviews. They wrote that "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" (Cui *et al*., 2018, p. 121).

Against this background, this paper addresses three main gaps in the literature: First, it empirically assesses the relationship between brand love and brand addiction. Second, it evaluates the effects of brand love and brand addiction on three distinct negative consumer behaviors, where one relates to a psychological aspect (consumer anxiety), and two relate to behavioral aspects (trash-talking and excessive spending). Third, this study examines the mediating effect of brand addiction on these negative behaviors. In so doing, we contribute to a better understanding of the brand addiction construct and its relationship to brand love and negative consumer behaviors related to brand addiction.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Brand Love

The triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) indicates that brand love has three primary components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Following the work of Shimp and Madden (1988) on the consumer-object relationship, Ahuvia (1993) showed that consumers possess a love sentiment for objects like brands. Later, Fournier (1998) suggested that consumers may see brands as relationship partners, playing a similar role analog to their affiliation with other individuals. According to the typology of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), committed partnerships entail a strong love relationship between brands and consumers. Ahuvia (2005) extended past work by demonstrating the role of loved objects in construing consumers' sense of self in the shade of identity conflicts. The construct of brand love was first conceptualized by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p. 81) who defined it as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name." Since that time, brand love has been studied extensively (e.g., Albert, Merunka and Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra *et al*., 2012; Fetscherin, 2014; Loureiro *et al*., 2017; Junaid *et al*., 2019). Studies have assessed either the antecedents of brand love (Albert and Valette-Florence, 2010) or its positive outcomes, such as word-of-mouth (Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016) or brand loyalty (Batra *et al*., 2012). The literature provides very limited insight into negative consumer outcomes as related to brand love. Only a handful of studies have explored the relationship between brand love and brand jealousy (Sarkar and Sreejesh, 2014) or the relationship between brand love and brand hate (Zarantonello *et al*., 2016). This study contributes to the literature by assessing the relationship between brand love and brand addiction as well as their relationship to the negative consumer behaviors of excessive consumer spending, trash-talking about competing brands, and consumers' feelings of anxiety.

2.2. Brand Addiction

There is a hierarchical relationship between brand love and brand addiction (Fournier, 1998). Recent studies (Cui *et al*., 2018; Mrad, 2018) have affirmed that while the two constructs have some similarities, including passion, emotional attachment, long term commitment, feeling of pleasure, and positive affect, "brand addiction is also conceptually different from brand love." Mrad (2018, p. 29) conducted a conceptual analysis that revealed that "brand addiction concerns a psychological state which involves both cognitive and affective forms of the close consumer-brand relationship. However, brand love is centered much more around the affective focus." Mrad (2018)

outlined that dependence, obsession, excessive and compulsive urges, failure to withstand impulses, and loss of control are specific attributes related to brand addiction. When consumers love a certain brand, they experience an emotional state without cognition that is distinct from brand addiction. The similarities and differences between the two suggest that not all brand love relationships entail brand addiction. Nevertheless, brand addiction may be a more intense and unhealthier version of the relationship between a consumer and a brand, and it may affect consumer behaviors negatively.

Brand addiction is a complex state that cannot be limited to a single, causal explanation. The few empirical studies that have been conducted on brand addiction have identified social comparison and materialism (Le, 2020) and brand self-expressiveness, brand innovativeness, and brand authenticity as influences on brand addiction (Francioni *et al*., 2020). Most recently, Bai *et al.* (2021) found that brand passion, a component of brand love, directly influences brand addiction. Likewise, Le (2020, p. 1) argued that brand addiction "refers to consumers' addictive behavior, with consumers particularly loving the brand," finding it associated with being a more intense but unhealthier relationship with a brand. Following these indications, we empirically assess the role of brand love as an antecedent of brand addiction.

Some studies have focused on positive outcomes of brand addiction, such as increased word-of-mouth, willingness to pay a premium price (Le, 2020), brand exclusivity (Francioni *et al*., 2020), and improved self-esteem and life satisfaction (Mrad and Cui, 2020). Because brand addiction is an unhealthy relationship between a consumer and a brand, we are interested more in the effects it may have on negative consumer behaviors. To the best of the authors' knowledge, only Francioni *et al*. (2020) have assessed negative consumer outcomes of brand addiction, such as the consumer's feeling of irritability or adopting obsessive and compulsive behaviors toward a brand. This study complements previous research by assessing the relationships between brand love and brand addiction with respect to the consumer's feeling of anxiety towards the brand, excessive spending on the brand, and trash-talking about rival brands.

2.3. Excessive Spending

The psychology literature describes compulsive buying as a poorly controlled or excessive behavior related to shopping and spending. Researchers have examined the relationship between addiction and excessive (or addictive) behaviors for decades (O'Guinn *et al*., 1989; Hirschman, 1992). Regarding brand relationships, Mrad and Cui (2020, p. 400) stated that "compulsive buying is expected to fulfill some positive functions for the concerned individuals such as mood repair […] and expressing creativity and self-identity […]. Ironically, this positive effect diminishes due to the excessive buying behavior." The behavior of excessive spending entails purchasing a brand that goes beyond one's personal needs or financial means. Brand lovers seek to buy as many items of their beloved brands as possible (Batra *et al*., 2012), whereas brand addicts want to buy and collect all of the items of their beloved brand (Cui *et al*., 2018). Thus, we expect a different effect between brand love and brand addiction concerning excessive spending. Brand addicts manifest compulsive and uncontrollable urges related to the alluring desire to buy and possess their brand (Cui *et al*., 2018). These consumers are obsessed with a brand, which gives them the urge to buy it.

There has been little empirical evidence collected so far of the effects of brand addiction, let alone brand love, related to excessive spending, and filling this gap is an important contribution made by this paper. Preliminary findings suggest that "individuals who are addicted to fast-fashion brands have the tendency to spend a significant amount of money to buy these brands" (Mrad and Cui, 2020, p. 9). However, the relationships between brand love, brand addiction, and excessive spending remain empirically underexplored.

2.4. Trash-Talking

Negative word-of-mouth and complaining are response behaviors typical of unsatisfied, unhappy, or angry consumers. Such behaviors have different degrees, ranging from private complaining to family and friends to public complaining to other people or organizations or complaining on social media. Trash-talking is different, as it describes talking negatively about a rival brand, characterized by some authors (Ewing *et al*., 2013) as verbal abuse of rival brands. Trash-talking is considered an essential phenomenon in sociology and sports (Dixon, 2007; Kniffin and Palacio, 2018; LoConto and Roth, 2005; Simons, 2003), and it has also attracted attention in the marketing literature (Japutra *et al.*, 2014, 2018). Simons (2003) defined trash-talking as a verbal offense

against rival brands, where trash-talking is uncivil and aggressive communication intended to malign and harm the competitor, either by its presence or its absence (Yip *et al*., 2018). Its quality may vary from crude insults to witty observations and may yield rivalry or unethical behavior (Yip *et al.*, 2018). Trash-talking has been studied in relationship to other branding concepts, such as brand attachment (Japutra *et al*., 2014), brand communities (Hickman and Ward, 2007), and brand evangelism (Marticotte *et al*., 2016). To the best of the authors' knowledge, it has not yet been assessed in relationship to brand love or brand addiction. Although this proposition was not empirically assessed, Cui *et al*. (2018) and Mrad (2018) suggested that brand addiction results in hostile word-of-mouth intended to hurt rival brands. This paper addresses the gap in the literature by empirically investigating the relationships between brand love, brand addiction, and trash-talking.

2.5. Consumers' Anxiety

Anxiety is the feeling of anxiousness in response to a stressor (Lazarus, 1984). It is a result of extreme concern in reaction to varying circumstances that one faces and the sense of a lack of control over these concerns (Stein and Heimberg, 2004). Within brand relationships, "brand addicts tend to feel anxious when they are unable to engage in activities related to the addictive brand" (Cui *et al*., 2018, p. 122). Thus, brand addicts may experience anxiety if they cannot buy a brand that they are addicted to. These consumers feel the urge to buy and own the brand and obtain a maximum number of products of that brand, even if they are not able to afford it. Brand addicts could "tend to experience feelings of gratification from possessing their brands while they may reveal feelings of anxiety when they are incapable of engaging in activities that are linked to their addictive brands" (Mrad *et al*., 2020, p. 2). The handful of studies on brand addiction mostly discuss anxiety conceptually (e.g., Cui *et al*., 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2020; Mrad *et al*., 2020), as either an attribute or outcome of brand addiction. To the best of the authors' knowledge, only Francioni *et al*. (2020) have empirically assessed the relationship between brand addiction and irritability. While it is associated with anxiety, this is not the same concept (Cornacchio *et al*., 2016). Using a convenience sample of Italian students, Francioni *et al*. (2020) found that brand addiction has a strong positive influence on irritability. The relationship between brand love and anxiety is unclear. Some, like Rossiter *et al*. (2012), have argued that separation anxiety is part of

brand love, which contradicts Regan *et al*. (1998), who found that separation anxiety is only a peripheral feature of love. However, most studies discuss this relationship anecdotally and argue "consumers who remain with a brand for long time develop an attachment and form a strong emotional relation with a brand. These emotional relations are so strong that consumers feel passionate about the brand, find the brand irreplaceable, and experience anxiety upon its unavailability in the marketplace" (Garg *et al*., 2016, p. 135). To the best of the authors' knowledge, the relationship between brand love and consumer anxiety has not been tested empirically. With this study, we hope to complement previous research and assess the relationship to brand addiction.

2.6. Hypothesis Development

The neurochemistry literature suggests that in certain cases, love can become literally addictive. Passionate love in particular is chemically and behaviorally analogous to addiction (e.g., Fisher *et al*. 2010; Burkett and Young, 2012). Further, the literature in psychology also shows that passionate love can in certain situations lead to addiction. Process addiction (Sussman, 2010), in contrast to substance addiction, refers to an obsession with certain people, things, or activities (e.g., spending money or gambling). When a person in love repeatedly seeks contact with another person, or, in this case a brand, this is often done to secure momentary feelings of pleasure and to relieve obsessive thoughts about the object of passion. If this sort of behavior negatively affects the individual's mental or physical health or financial well-being, it may rise to the level of an addiction. It should be understood that not all types of love lead to addiction, but this addiction can pre-condition love. Based on Fournier's (1998) suggestion of hierarchical relationship between brand love and brand addiction and the initial finding of Mrad and Cui (2017, p. 1269) that "brand love leads to brand addiction," we propose to test the following hypothesis:

H1: Brand love leads to brand addiction.

Previous research has shown that brand love leads to spending more money or being willing to pay a price premium. Consumers in love with a brand spend a large amount of time and money on it (Batra *et al.*, 2012). Consumers in a love relationship with a brand are willing to pay extra for that brand (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Kang, 2015), but given that brand love is a strong predictor of consumer loyalty and satisfaction (Albert *et al*., 2008; Albert and Merunka, 2013;

Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). This strict adherence out of loyalty and satisfaction is expected to restrict consumers' excessive shopping from other brands. However, brand love does not result in obsession and hoarding, unlike brand addiction. This may result in an overall decrease in financial spending compared to the effect of brand addiction.

Consumers in a love relationship do not experience absolute dependence and submission to the brand; that is, in the case of addiction. They are less likely to indulge in hostile word of mouth while favoring or advocating their brands. However, brand love research suggests that consumers discuss their beloved brands with others and engage in positive word-of-mouth (i.e., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016).

Batra *et al.* (2012, p. 6) stated that consumers experience separation anxiety as an "anxiety about possibly losing the loved brand." Consumers' overall anxiety is more complex and is a broad construct that includes, among other things, feelings of being worried or fearing something might happen to a brand. The inception of brand love is rooted in the interpersonal relationship (Sternberg, 1986). Research on the effects of interpersonal relationships, we find that a love relationship fosters a sense of security and confidence (Fournier, 1998; Sternberg, 1997). This may help to cure anxiety and state of depression (Burgess *et al.*, 2005; Wood *et al.*, 2007). Emotions-focused therapy also endorses love as a means to cure the symptoms of anxiety and depression (Greenberg and Watson, 2006). Based on the previous discussion, we test the following hypotheses:

H2: Brand love significantly effects a) excessive spending, b) trash-talking, or c) consumer anxiety.

Hoarding is a key feature of brand addiction (Mrad and Cui, 2017) in which brand addicts cannot resist visiting their favorite brand's shop, tending to buy more and more, even of the same items, and stocking them up. According to Cui *et al.* (2018), brand addicts may also exhibit debt-tolerance, borrowing money to satisfy an obsession with their addicting brand. This tendency to endless buying and hoarding may result in excessive spending.

Mrad and Cui (2017) identified that brand addiction results in an outward influence in which a brand addict may seek to influence others' purchase decisions. This tendency to influence others may lead to extreme word-of-mouth, developing even to trash-talking about rival brands.

Mendelson and Mello (1996) found that addictive behaviors lead to destructive psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, leading brand addicts to experience irritability when they cannot engage with their favored brands (Mrad, 2018) and develop an acquisitive desire, linked with depression and anxiety (Cui *et al*., 2018). Therefore, the evolving brand addiction literature (i.e., Budden and Griffin, 1996; Cui *et al*., 2018; Fournier and Alvarez, 2013; Mrad and Cui, 2017) suggests that addiction may lead to negative outcomes, including excessive spending, trash-talking, and consumer anxiety. Building on this, we test the following hypotheses.

> *H3: Brand addiction leads to a) excessive spending, b) trash-talking, and c) consumer anxiety.*

According to consumer-object relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), the relationship between a consumer and a brand may evolve from mild (liking), to strong (love) and even extreme (addiction) relationships (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013; Mrad *et al.*, 2020; Mrad and Cui, 2017). Langner *et al*. (2016, p. 15) showed that there are different trajectories of brand love, one of which is "liking becomes love." Similarly and initially, there was anecdotal evidence in the marketing literature that "brand love leads to brand addiction" (Mrad and Cui, 2017, p. 1269) where the latter "refers to consumers' addictive behavior, with consumers particularly loving the brand" (Le, 2020, p. 1). Most recently, Elhajjar *et al*. (2021) empirically assess a number of antecedences of brand addiction. Their results show brand passion (2 items), followed by brand attachment (2 items), brand liking (1 items), and brand love (2 items) are significant antecedences of brand addiction. Unfortunately, there are a couple of issues with their study. First, they did not use validated scales from previous studies (e.g., the brand love scale by Bagozzi *et al*., 2017). Second, their conceptualization, according to which all of these concepts are antecedents of brand addiction, is problematic. For example, research has shown that brand trust (Albert *et al*., 2013) is an antecedent of brand passion, and brand love is a higher-order concept that includes aspects of brand attachment and brand passion (Batra *et al*., 2012), as well as brand liking (Langner *et al*., 2016). Finally, extensive research shows that brand love leads to brand loyalty (Batra *et al*., 2012). Given

all this, it would have been more appropriate to model brand love as an antecedence of brand addiction. For these reasons, in this study, we model and test the extent to which brand addiction mediates the relationship between brand love and the three negative consumers' behaviors with the following hypothesis:

H4: Brand addiction positively mediates the relationship between brand love and a) excessive spending, b) trash-talking, and c) consumer anxiety.

Figure 1 visualizes our research model and the various hypotheses tested in this paper.

--- Insert Figure 1 about here ---

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

This study collected data from young fashion brand consumers in China. We chose fashion brands, following previous studies on brand addiction (e.g., Mrad and Cui, 2017). This study focused on young consumers because of their increasing numbers and buying power (Nusair *et al.*, 2013), along with their greater sensitivity toward fashion brands (Sönmez, 2010) and increased disposition to consume such brands (Junaid *et al*., 2019; Lee-Taylor and Cosenza, 2002). The initial survey was developed in English—as all the original measures adapted were in English— and then translated into Chinese (Hussain *et al.*, 2019; Junaid, Hou, *et al.*, 2019) by bilingual Chinese doctoral candidates enrolled in business school, following deVijver and Leung's (1997) translation and back-translation method. To ensure face and content validity, two marketing professors reviewed the Chinese version of the questionnaire. The survey instrument was pre-tested with a sample of 40 respondents to identify problems before the actual survey. We then circulated 500 questionnaires, printed on the paper, using a non-probability convenience sampling technique, and 352 complete responses were received (70.4 percent response rate). Following marketing scholars (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Alexandrov *et al*., 2013; Bairrada *et al*., 2018; Choi and Winterich, 2013; Junaid *et al*., 2019; Tuškej *et al*., 2013) who have studied branding, the respondents were first informed that this survey involved "outcomes of brand love and brand addiction" and that they would be asked to name their most loved fashion brand that they bought

or wore, to which they felt had a special and strong relationship. The questionnaire asked respondents to "please write the name of YOUR most loved fashion brand that you use." Then respondents where sked to "please rate the following questions according to the given scales keeping your experience with your loved brand in mind." All measurement items were put into the brand relationships context. The respondents' demographic profile is provided in Table 1.

--- Insert Table 1 about here ---

3.2. Measurement Instruments

We have drawn all measurement instruments from the existing literature. Brand love was measured using a six-item scale by Bagozzi *et al*. (2017). Brand addiction was measured using 10 items from Mrad and Cui (2017). A five-item scale for excessive spending was adopted from Ho and Ito (2019). To measure trash-talking, we adopted a three-item scale from Japutra *et al*. (2018). A seven-item scale was taken from Spitzer *et al*. (2006) to measure consumer anxiety. All items were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), with the exception of anxiety, which used a scale from never (1) to every time (5).

3.3. Common Method Bias

To address common method bias, we assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses and encouraged them to answer the questions honestly and anonymously. Further, they were informed that there were no right or wrong answers to the items. After the data collection, we conducted Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), which confirmed that a single factor explained only 22.95 percent of the variance, which is well below the cutoff criterion of 50 percent. This indicator did not signal that common method bias was a major concern for this study.

4. Results and Discussion

We followed a two-step statistical approach to analyze our data using Mplus Version 8.1. First, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to check the reliability and validity of the

measurement instruments used. Second, we performed a structural equation model (SEM) to test our research model with the underlying hypotheses (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

4.1. Measurement Model

The results of our CFA are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The measurement model fits with the data, as the values of the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.947), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI = 0.940), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR = 0.052), root mean error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.043), and chi-square to degree of freedom ratio ($\chi 2/df$ =1.637) all fall under the cutoff criteria proposed by Hair *et al.* (2010) and Hu and Bentler (1999). As Table 2 shows, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for each construct are above 0.70, indicating internal consistency (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) for all items, with the exception of two items from the ten item brand addiction scale, exceed the threshold of 0.50, suggesting convergent validity. The two items with the lowest values were dropped for further analyses.

--- Insert Table 2 about here---

For discriminant validity, we compare the squared inter-scale correlations with the square root of AVE for each construct. The results in Table 3 indicate that discriminant validity is established. With the exception of that between brand love and brand addiction, all AVE values are higher than their corresponding inter-scale correlations. We perform a chi-square difference test to verify discriminant validity for all the pairs of constructs to address this issue. We compare the unconstrained and constrained models, and the result of the chi-square difference test is significant for all pairs of constructs, indicating that the unconstrained model of each pair is superior to the constrained model. The results in Table 4 imply that the constructs are different and cannot be combined into a single measure.

---Insert Table 3 about here---

---Insert Table 4 about here---

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4.2. Structural Model

The model fit indices of our research model leads to acceptable model fits, where the values for TLI = 0.939, CFI = 0.946, RMSEA = 0.043, SRMR = 0.052, and χ^2 /df =1.638 are all under the cutoff criteria (Hair *et al.*, 2010; Hu and Bentler, 1999). The results of the SEM are presented in Table 5 and Figure 2 respectively.

---Insert Table 5 about here---

---Insert Figure 2 about here---

Our results prompt us to draw a few interesting observations. First, our findings suggest that brand love leads to brand addiction (H1: $\beta = 0.686$; $p < 0.05$); hence, H1 is supported. Our results also support the hypothesis that brand addiction leads to excessive spending (H3a: $\beta = 0.712$; $p < 0.05$). Hence, H3a is supported. This finding suggests that addicted consumers tend to buy more than they need and may encounter financial mismanagement. The possible reason for excessive spending may be the obsession and lack of control that brand addicts experience in their addiction brand relationship (Cui *et al.*, 2018). We also find that brand addiction leads to trash-talking (H3b: $\beta = 0.505$; $p < 0.05$) or to hostile word-of-mouth intended to insult a rival brand. Therefore, H3b is supported. Mrad and Cui (2017) noted that brand addicts might have an outward influence on others who purchase their addicted brand. We obtain similar findings here to Cui *et al*. (2018). They indicated that extreme word-of-mouth was a tactic of brand addicts seeking to convince and influence others to quit rival brands and use the products or services from their addictive brand. Possible explanations for this behavior could be brand addicts' significant investment of resources (Mrad, 2018), excessive commitment (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad, 2018), dependence out of obsession, and absolute submissiveness to the brand (Cui *et al.*, 2018). Finally, brand addiction leads to consumer anxiety (H3c: $\beta = 0.457$; $p < 0.05$), so H3c is again supported. Cui *et al*. (2018) and Mrad (2018) also suggested that brand addicts experience restlessness and irritability. The prime reason for an increase in consumer anxiety may be excessive dependence on the addictive brands (Cui *et al.*, 2018), ceasing other professional, communal, and leisure activities for the sake of their addictive brands (Mrad, 2018), or excessive mental and behavioral preoccupation with the object of obsession (Cui *et al*., 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017).

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We also found that brand addiction positively mediated the relationship between brand love and excessive spending (H4a: $\beta = 0.488$; $p < 0.05$), trash-talking (H4b: $\beta = 0.346$; $p < 0.05$), and consumer anxiety (H4c: $\beta = 0.313$; $p < 0.05$). Hence, H4a–c are also supported. These findings, illustrated in Figure 2, imply that when consumers develop an addiction to their loved brand, they go on to develop dependence, obsession, and submission to that brand, resulting in a lack of control, leading them to buy that brand in surplus, resulting in excessive spending. This addiction to loved brands results in powerful word-of-mouth and ruthless advocacy, which can take the form of trash-talking. Obsession out of addiction with loved brands also yields to mental and behavioral preoccupation, resulting in engrossing thoughts and anxiety of not having been able to purchase all items from the addicting brand.

However, in our research model, the direct (H2a–c) and indirect or mediated effects (H4a–c) between brand love and the three outcome variables have opposing signs. This is not unusual, and research refers to it as an inconsistent mediation model (Davis, 1985; MacKinnon *et al*., 2000). Because our model takes brand addiction to be a mediator, a negative direct effect is shown between brand love and the three outcome variables (H2a–c), and a positive indirect effect is found between these variables (H4a–c) via the proposed mediators brand addiction. In that respect, MacKinnon *et al*. (2000, p. 174) stated that "in the mediational context, the relationship is reduced because the mediator explains part or all of the relationship because it is in the causal path between the independent and dependent variables," and the effects in such models should be referred to as suppression effects. Our results in Figure 2 satisfy the three criteria outlined by MacKinnon *et al*. (2000, p. 175) to determine mediation. There must be a significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variables and between the independent variable and the mediating variable; the meditator must be a significant predictor of the dependent variables in a model, including both the mediator and the independent variable. MacKinnon *et al*. (2000) argue that if the magnitude of the direct and indirect effects in such a model is similar but with opposite signs, the total effect may be close to zero. This is the case here, as the differences, or total effects, between the direct and indirect effects of brand love on the three outcome variables is close to zero. Table 6 summarizes, based on the values presented in Table 5, the values related to the direct (H2a–c) and indirect effects (H4a–c) in relation to brand love onto the three negative outcome variables. We observe that brand love's total effects (direct and indirect) on these variables is close to zero. While the path coefficients are statistically significant between brand love and the three

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outcome variable, the sign is negative, suggesting that brand love does not lead to excessive spending (H2a), trash-talking (H2b), or consumer anxiety (H2c). This means that brand love is not associated with these negative consumer behaviors, which clearly differentiates it from brand addiction.

---Insert Table 6 about here---

5. Conclusion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Brand love has been widely explored in terms of its effects on positive outcomes, including brand loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and willingness to pay a price premium (Albert *et al*., 2013; Bairrada *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012; Junaid *et al*., 2019). In response to repeated research calls (Park *et al*., 2013; Reimann *et a*l., 2012) to explore new branding concepts, this study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the concept of brand addiction and its relationship to brand love and their effects in regards to three negative consumers' behavior (excessive spending, trash-talking other brands, and consumers' overall feeling of anxiety). Furthermore, the concept of brand addiction is in its infancy, and the literature on this construct is not fully embedded with other branding constructs or with the investigation of its consequences (Cui *et al.*, 2018; Mrad, 2018; Mrad and Cui, 2017). In that respect, this paper expands current knowledge on brand addiction, as follows.

First, this study demonstrates that brand love drives brand addiction, suggesting that brand addicts love their brand to the extent that it has become an unhealthy brand relationship. Similar to the findings by Langner *et al*. (2016, p. 15) who found that one trajectory of brand love is "liking becomes love," we find that when "love becomes addiction" it can result in negative consumer behaviors we find that in certain cases, "love becomes addictive." Second, the findings show that the brand love does not lead to excessive spending, trash-talking, or anxiety but brand addiction does. Third, this study further adds to brand relationship theory by identifying the mediating role that brand addiction plays between brand love and these negative behaviors. These findings do align with previous research (Fournier, 1998), suggesting the existence of several stages of brand relationships ranging from passionate love to addictive obsession. In that respect, our results

empirically validate a hierarchical relationship between brand love and brand addiction, such that the latter morphing to the dark side of brand relationships. There seems to be a tipping point with the concept of brand addiction, where the positive brand relationship of brand love translates into a negative one with brand addiction. These findings echo Mendelson and Mello (1996), who determined that addictive behavior is psychologically or physically destructive.

Clearly, there is significant room for further research to assess the extent and under which conditions brand addiction leads to positive or negative outcomes. In that respect, the psychology literature argues for there are levels of addiction (DiFranza *et al*., 2012); future research could assess the extent this applies to brand addiction. It may be that differentiating between low, medium. and high brand addiction would lead to different outcomes, where one could hypothesize that lower level might lead to positive outcomes, medium level of brand addiction maybe has no positive or negative consequences and higher levels of brand addiction lead to negative consequences. Future research could investigate this and other avenues to further shed some light on this construct.

Research in psychology has investigated many different factors leading to addictive behavior, such as a biological predisposition due to a neurotransmitter imbalance in the brain, psychological reasons in which addiction is a maladaptive copy strategy, or an addictive behavior resulting from the environment or social learning reasons due to emotional (stress) or social (peer pressure) aspects. The neurophysiological study by Reimann *et al*. (2012) provides some initial clues where close brand relationships can lead to brand addiction, as such close relationships have shown an activation of the insula, a part of the brain, which is responsible for addictive behaviors, such as those related to nicotine (McClernon *et al*., 2005) or alcohol (Myrick *et al*., 2004) addiction. Therefore, further research could also investigate to what extend these factors play a role for brand addiction.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Our research offers guidelines for the marketing managers who are keen to develop a strong emotional connection with their customers and thus lays a blueprint for it. Managers can develop an addiction to their brands with the help of brand love because our results confirm that brand love leads to brand addiction.

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Current findings suggest that consumers are willing to spend extra on addictive brands. Therefore, marketing managers can use brand addiction as a tool to enhance their sales and increase profitability. Our results also indicate that addicted consumers intensely talk about their favored brand. These consumers advocate and defend these brands. Marketing managers may direct this vocal tendency of their consumers to their best interest which is earning referrals and influence. However, it is important for the brand managers to educate these devotees to not violate anyone's personal space because that may result in a negative impression of the brand. Managers need to realize to their addicted customers that they represent the brand, and this representation should be in line with the brand image. Our findings indicate that consumers in an addiction relationship may experience anxiety. The reason for this increase in anxiety may include excessive dependence on the addictive brands (Cui *et al*., 2018). This increases the responsibility of the brand managers to keenly consider consumers' feedback and serve and serve them uninterrupted. Another reason behind this increase in anxiety is that addicted consumers may cease their communal, and leisure activities for the sake of their addictive brands (Mrad, 2018). Brand managers can develop interactive communities of their consumers, and can also organize events that supplement the leisure experience of these consumers. Brand managers must be in a close liaison to timely read the customers' emotional states and need to develop personalized and highly interactive communication by adopting suitable new technologies (e.g., forums, blogs, social media, live chats). Brand addicts are more sensitive to the brand offering and can be critical if they feel that the brand has wronged them (e.g., abrupt changes in the brand offerings, unexpected deletion).

Our results evince that brand love is not related to excessive spending, trash-talking, and consumer anxiety. These findings increase brand managers' confidence in brand love that it is not related to any negative behavior. Managers can pursue the development of a love relationship between their customers and brands knowing that this relationship does not have any negative impact on the consumers. This licenses the brand managers to use brand love as a tool for their best interest without hurting anyone's interest as the engagement theory (Pansari and Kumar, 2017) postulates that in a brand relationship where consumers and brands are like partners, both benefit.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

There are several possible research avenues that arise from this work. First, it is based on a convenience sample from China. Future research could investigate brand addiction in a different cultural context and use a variety of sampling techniques to validate our research model. Second, our study focused on fashion brands, and future research could investigate other product categories. The cross-sectional nature of our data limits its ability to demonstrate causal inferences. Lab studies that incorporate control groups can overcome this limitation. Third, future studies may also follow a longitudinal assessment to address dynamic aspects that could encapsulate brand lovers' trajectory toward brand addiction and the conditions and circumstances under which brand love leads or does not lead to brand addiction. Another limitation is that we measured brand love as a uni-dimensional construct, drawing on items developed by Bagozzi *et al*. (2017). It might be interesting to explore to what extent other measurement instruments, including multidimensional brand love scales, would validate our research model and findings. Future research may look for consumer-related factors such as personality type, peer pressure, mental health disorder, that might contribute to the addiction to loved brands. Future research could also investigate and compare brand addiction and brand love's effects on other possible behavior outcomes, such as self-esteem, consumer well-being, consumer happiness, or social comparison. This study clearly indicates that we are only beginning to understand brand addiction, and there are many exciting avenues for future research to explore this relevant and fascinating construct.

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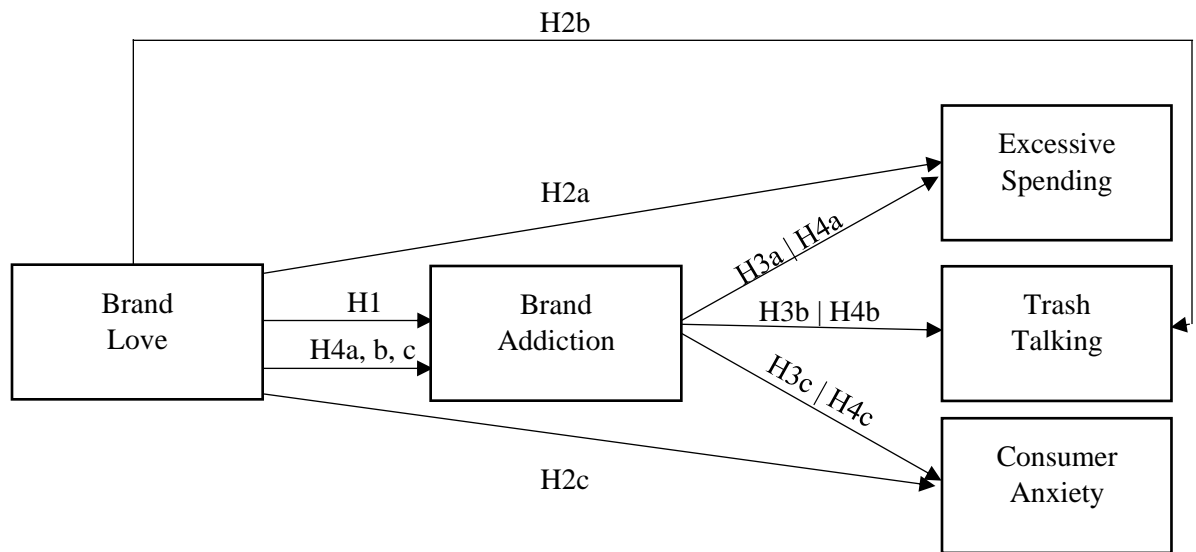
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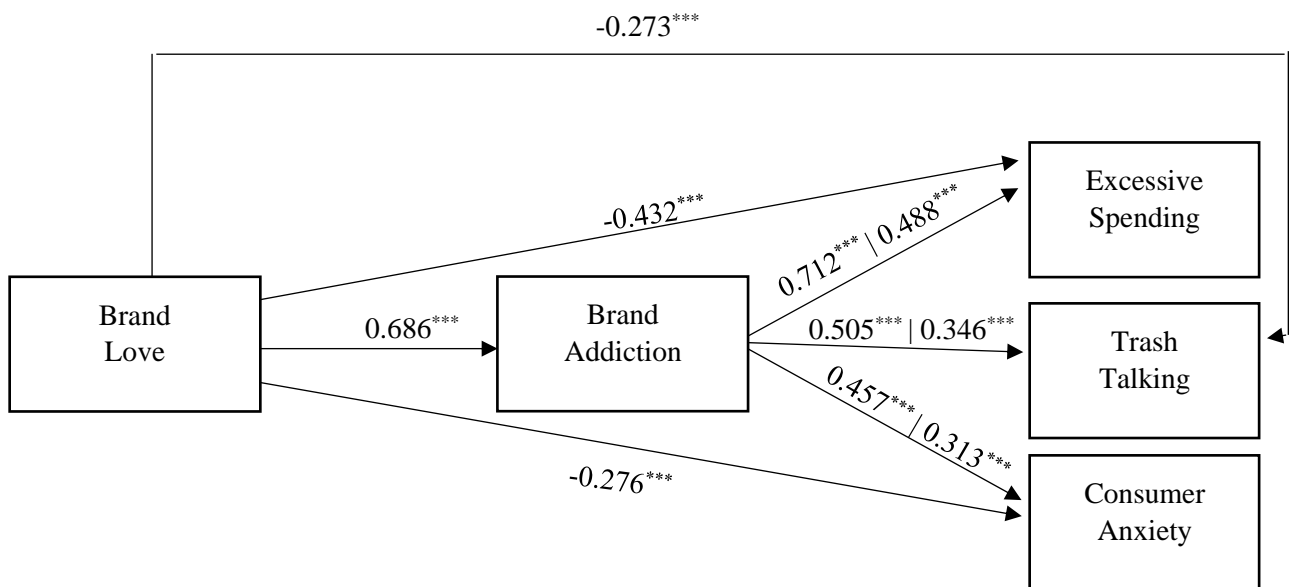
Figure 2: *Results*

Note: *** *represents significant relationship*

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Type		Respondents	%
Gender	Male	158	45
	Female	191	54
	Other	3	1
Age (Years)	18–25	183	52
	26–35	151	43
	36–40	18	5
Education Level	High School	9	3
	College/Twelfth grade	5	1
	Undergraduate Degree	219	62
	Graduate Degree	70	20
	Other/Technical Education	49	14
Profession	Student	208	59
	Employee	144	41

Table 2
Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Constructs and items	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Love		0.764	0.758
1. Use of this brand says something "true" and "deep" about who I am	0.522		
2. I have a passionate desire to use this brand	0.640		
3. I feel emotionally connected to this brand	0.596		
4. I believe that I will be using this brand for a long time	0.625		
5. If this brand were to go out of existence, I would feel anxiety	0.555		
6. Overall, I have very positive feelings and evaluations of this brand	0.608		
Brand Addiction		0.817	0.820
1. I try very hard to get everything from my favorite brand	0.599		
2. I often fail to control myself from purchasing my favorite brand	0.689		
3. I often find myself thinking about my favorite brand.	0.675		
4. I tend to allocate certain portion of my monthly income to buy the products of my favorite brand	0.594		
5. I experience a state of impatience before I can get hold of the products of my favorite brand	0.508		
6. I follow my favorite brand's news all the time	0.613		
7. I usually plan when the next purchase of my favorite brand will be	0.565		
8. I would invest money in some way to my favorite brand to support it	0.531		
9. I tend to give up some life activities and duties such as the occupational, academic and familial in order to fulfil some activities related to my favorite brand.*			
10. I usually remember tenderly the previous experience with my favorite brand.*			
Excessive Spending		0.838	0.842
1. In order to buy things I want, I am willing to borrow money from my family or friends	0.581		
2. I spend more money than I can afford	0.760		
3. I feel that I cannot cut down my expenses on shopping	0.750		
4. It is hard to control my urge to buy things	0.830		
5. I nudge my parents to give me more allowance	0.632		
Trash Talking		0.867	0.865
1. I talk about how negative I feel about competing brands to other people	0.798		
2. I talk about how inferior competing brands compare to this brand to other people	0.866		
3. I say negative things about competing brands to other people	0.819		
Consumer Anxiety		0.904	0.909
1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge	0.675		
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying	0.763		
3. Worrying too much about different things	0.737		

4. Trouble relaxing		0.760
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still		0.817
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable		0.754
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen		0.787

Note: * low factor loads. Removed from CFA.

Table 3

Inter-scale Correlation and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Construct	AVE	Brand Love	Brand Addiction	Excessive Spending	Trash Talking	Consumer Anxiety
Brand Love	0.356	*0.593*				
Brand Addiction	0.359	0.686	*0.599*			
Excessive Spending	0.512	0.057	0.416	*0.716*		
Trash Talking	0.686	0.073	0.317	0.422	*0.828*	
Consumer Anxiety	0.573	0.043	0.272	0.271	0.276	*0.757*

Note: The values marked in *italics* on the diagonal represent the square roots of AVEs of each construct

Table 4

Chi-square Difference Test

Pair of Constructs	Model Fit CFI / TLI	Chi-Square	d.f.	$\Delta\chi^2$	P
Brand Love — Excessive Spending	0.914 / 0.890	147.494	43	437.816	0.000
Brand Love — Trash Talking	0.966 / 0.952	60.134	26	511.566	0.000
Brand Love — Consumer Anxiety	0.927 / 0.911	205.433	64	447.296	0.000
Brand Love — Brand Addiction	0.919 / 0.903	184.172	76	147.614	0.000
Brand Addiction — Excessive Spending	0.904 / 0.883	209.883	64	461.322	0.000
Brand Addiction — Trash Talking	0.952 / 0.939	103.564	43	448.763	0.000
Brand Addiction — Consumer Anxiety	0.915 / 0.900	278.002	89	603.461	0.000
Excessive Spending — Trash Talking	0.965 / 0.948	63.994	19	399.563	0.000
Excessive Spending — Consumer Anxiety	0.945 / 0.927	144.109	34	600.763	0.000
Trash Talking — Consumer Anxiety	0.945 / 0.927	144.109	34	479.639	0.000

Note: Model Fit Indices, Chi-Square, and Degree of Freedom (d.f.) statistics belong to unconstrained models

Table 5

Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	S.E	p-value
H1	Brand Love→Brand Addiction	0.686***	0.046	0.000
H2a	Brand Love→Excessive Spending	-0.432***	0.104	0.000
H2b	Brand Love→Trash Talking	-0.273***	0.104	0.009
H2c	Brand Love→Consumer Anxiety	-0.276***	0.103	0.007
H3a	Brand Addiction→Excessive Spending	0.712***	0.096	0.000
H3b	Brand Addiction→Trash Talking	0.505***	0.098	0.000
H3c	Brand Addiction→Consumer Anxiety	0.457***	0.097	0.000
H4a	Brand Love→Brand Addiction→Excessive Spending	0.488***	0.085	0.000
H4b	Brand Love→Brand Addiction→Trash Talking	0.346***	0.076	0.000
H4c	Brand Love→Brand Addiction→Consumer Anxiety	0.313***	0.075	0.000

	Construct	R^2		
	Brand Addiction	0.470		
	Excessive Spending	0.272		
	Trash Talking	0.140		
	Consumer Anxiety	0.112		

Table 6

Brand Love Effects

Model	Research Model		
Relationship	Direct H2a,b,c	Indirect H4a,b,c	**Total Effect**
Brand Love→Excessive Spending	-0.432	0.488	**0.056**
Brand Love→Trash Talking	-0.273	0.346	**0.073**
Brand Love→Consumer Anxiety	-0.276	0.313	**0.037**