Brand Attachment and the Compulsive Buyer

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Abstract

In this paper a linkage between compulsive buying tendencies and brand attachment is developed, which is moderated by brand popularity. Consumers who engage in compulsive buying try to alleviate negative feelings, which are temporarily forgotten and replaced with positive feelings (Faber and Christenson 1996). The research is important because the phenomenon of compulsive buying is very serious while brand power has come to play a significant role in both firm strategic planning and consumer decision-making processes. We find that compulsive buying and brand attachment are positively related. However, the results are unclear in regards moderation effects of brand popularity.

1.0 Introduction

Compulsive buying is defined as the urge to engage in uncontrolled and excessive purchasing usually due to negative internal feelings (Flight, Rountree and Beatty 2012). Many compulsive buyers suffer from abnormally high levels of depression, which leads to emotional suffering and impaired judgment (Kaplan 2006). Consumers feel relief from their negative feelings when they buy certain products that reflect their ideal-self and thus, make them feel better (Alex and Joseph 2012). These positive feelings though do not last for very long as feelings of regret and guilt return leading to a cycle of compulsive buying behavior (Faber and Christensen 1996). Kaplan (2006) states that one in twenty adults suffer from compulsive buying tendencies leading not only to financial consequences associated with compulsive buying, but also emotional consequences.

In this paper we theorize the linkage between compulsive buying tendencies and brand attachment, which is moderated by brand popularity. When a consumer feels like they are reaching their ideal-self, their level of self-esteem and happiness grows (Alex and Joseph 2012). Prior literature suggests that brands with a positive and "popular" image are more likely to be chosen because of the emotional connection between the brand and the ideal-self, thus leading to a stronger brand attachment (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci 2012). Brand attachment meanwhile is created when a consumer is drawn to a brand. Such attachment may be an outcome of brand-image and self-image alignment or self-congruency (Alex and Joseph 2012).

This research is important because we fill the gap between brand identity and the compulsive buyer by joining between compulsive buying tendencies, brand attachment, and

brand popularity constructs. The following section literature review introduces key constructs and develops our research hypotheses. Following the literature review, we describe our research methods followed by our study results. We continue by discussing the key findings, and hypotheses test results. We conclude by discussing future research and limitations.

2.0 Literature Review
2.1 Branding

Brands are regarded as one of the most valuable intangible assets a firm can have (Keller and Lehmann 2006). The power of a strong brand is inescapable in today's commercially developed economies. The brand concept uniquely possesses the ability to deliver enhanced profits to the firm while at the same time assisting consumers as they work through their decision-making processes. A *brand* is defined as "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (American Marketing Association, 2012). A firm is able to control aspects of a brand such as product shape, packaging and logo, which help establish a distinct brand identity for differentiation from competitors (Iacobucci 2012). A firm must decide on what the brand is and is not meant to be in in the mind of the consumer by completing a positioning statement (Mooradian, Matzler and Ring 2012). Brand positioning involves forming the associations customers have about a certain brand (Keller, Sternthal and Tybout 2002).

Brands are the reflection of the complete experience that customers have with products (Keller and Lehmann 2006). Brands help sell products that have served consumers well in the past by allowing them to associate a prior purchase with a positive experience (Mooradian, et al. 2012). Thus, when a consumer recognizes a brand by color, logo, or name they are reminded of the benefits that a brand provides and this recognition turns into brand loyalty (Iacobucci 2012). Consumers are drawn to brand loyalty because it can simplify choice, reduce risk, and create trusting relationships between consumer and brand (Keller and Lehmann 2006).

To further illustrate how consumers internalize brands consider the idea of brand personality. Brands have human characteristics that consumers identify as their own (Aaker 1997). While certain products are thought to be rugged, or sincere others may be perceived as cool, stylish, or popular. These symbolic meanings about products are ultimately derived from their association with social roles (Mooradian, et al. 2012). Consumers feel as if they can express, affirm, or enhance their actual self, ideal self or specific dimension of the self through the use of brand and drives them into specific buying patterns (Park and John 2010).The consumer's self-perception is altered regardless if the brand is purchased once or repeatedly; purchasing the brand is public or in private can also alter the consumer's self-perception (Park and John 2010).

Brand relationships form when customers have or desire a relationship with a company (Fournier 1998). For a relationship to exist, there must be interdependence between the two partners (Hinde 1979). Such, brand relationships bring customers comfort because they associate the brand as a member of the relationship and not just as an object (Fournier 1998). Consumers are willing to create these relationships because they can change their self-concept or reinforce their self-concept through them (Aron and Aron 1996; Aron, Paris, and Aron 1995). Brand relationships guide consumers to their ideal self by resolving their life theme – a concern or tension in an individual's life (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979).

2.2 Compulsive Buying Tendency

Compulsive buying is described as the action of uncontrollable buying regardless of social standing, financial, or personal ramifications (Flight, et al. 2012). Compulsive buying tendencies are most likely unplanned purchases triggered by negative emotions. People who have a lack of self-esteem or feelings of depression, anxiety, and tension are more likely to be compulsive buyers (Flight, et al. 2012). Compulsive buying is viewed similarly as pathological gambling, kleptomania, and eating disorders (Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson 2009). Compulsive behaviors have similar causes and patterns and many disorders may overlap (Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson 2009). Women, for instance, diagnosed with binge eating are significantly more likely to have compulsive buying tendencies (Faber, Christenson, de Zwaan and Mitchell 1995). Many people trivialize this affliction and do not associate compulsive buying as a serious disorder. A reason this disorder may be over looked is the way it is presented in the media. Store advertisements, which are focused on attracting buyers, deceive consumers into thinking their buying habits are normal and encouraged. Compulsive buying is referred to as "retail therapy," which gives it a positive connotation (Kyrios, Frost and Stektee 2004).

People who have compulsive buying tendencies often are trying to gain self-esteem through their purchases (Faber and O'Guinn 1987). Reeves, Baker, and Truluck describe consumers' actions as trying to fill their empty self (2012). The empty self is defined as displaying depression, low self-esteem, and poor relationships with others (Reeves, Baker and Truluck 2012). Consumers with an empty self are more likely to compulsive buy because it makes them feel like they are resolving internal deficiencies (Reeves, et al. 2012). The psychological relief buying provides only lasts for a short period of time until the person's negative feelings come back (Flight, et al. 2012).

Compulsive buyers frequently purchase appearance-related items as an attempt to improve their self-esteem (Krueger 1988; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab 1990). These appearance-related products are used to influence their impression of themselves or other's impressions of themselves (Faber, O'Guinn and Krych 1987; Krueger 1988). Women are more likely to have compulsive buying tendencies towards clothes and jewelry, while men are more likely to have compulsive buying tendencies towards cars and electronics (Faber and O'Guinn 1987). As mentioned before, the relief consumers feel when engaging in compulsive buying tendencies only lasts for a short period of time. Following the purchase, consumers feel shame, guilt, and/or depression (Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson 2009). These feelings cause embarrassment and may make compulsive buyers hide, give away, or dispose of their purchases (Faber and O'Guinn 1988; Hassay and Smith 1996).

Compulsive buying tendencies have been studied in detail and there are different theories as to why consumers engage in compulsive buying. One theory involves biochemical factors suggesting abnormal levels of serotonin, which can cause depression promote this behavior (Faber and Christenson 1996).

Another theory involves psychological factors, which include low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, desire for approval, and desire for arousal (Faber and Christenson 1996). This theory suggests that compulsive buying can give feelings of happiness to counter the negative feelings a consumer may be feeling. It also suggests that consumers try to reach their ideal self through their choice of products.

The theory that is commonly related to compulsive buying tendencies is sociological (Faber and Christenson 1996). Sociological factors include family experience, gender roles, and disintegration of modern life. There are a couple ways this theory can relate to

compulsive buying. Compulsive behavior is related to coming from a family characterized as having violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and emotional conflict (Hirschman 1992). A family environment with very demanding parenting styles and a focus on perfectionism lowers one's self worth, thus increasing ones chance at becoming a compulsive buyer (Guidano and Liotti 1983). Children with disturbances in their families are more likely to place emphasis on material items to help control their internal deficiencies (Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton 1997).

2.3 The Actual and Ideal Self-concept

Following both a psychological and social approach the compulsive buyer is motivated by their self-concept, which is based on their perceived fit into the world around them. Self-concept is a continuous process consumers go through when they are determining who they are and how they are thought of through two perspectives the actual self and ideal self (Onknisit and Shaw 1987). The actual self is the reality of who and what the consumer thinks they are in the present while, the ideal self is what the consumer aspires to be (Alex and Joseph 2012). The connections created when consumers choose brands with particular personalities they feel will achieve their actual or ideal self are considered emotional brand attachments and create brand loyalty (Chaplin and John 2005; Park et al. 2010). Self-expression through brands is the internal force that drives a consumer to have brand preferences (Belk 1988; Richins 1994). If a consumer wishes to express himself/herself in a certain way, that consumer will create a preference to brands he/she feels appropriately expresses himself/herself (Aaker 1999). This is relevant to branding because consumers can evaluate the product by comparing it to themselves to assess the degree to which it matches the image their actual or ideal self. The self is a malleable construct and consumers use brands to improve their actual and ideal self (Aaker 1999).

Embracing the self-concept framework, b*rand-user* or *product-user* image is an idea that reflects the stereotypical consumer who uses a class of products or brands (Sirgy et al. 1997). They are used to draw perceptual comparisons between a brand's *typical user* and the desired self-image of a potential consumer (Sirgy 1982; Sirgy et al. 1997). Through self-monitoring, consumers assess their own 'fit' with the image of the focal brands typical user and if that image is desirable then they may engage in the brand (Sirgy 1982; Coolsen and Kumashiro 2009). This engagement leads to the consumer feeling approval, which leads to increased self-esteem (Schlenker 1981).

2.4 Brand Attachment and Self-congruency

Brand attachment is defined as the strength of the bond with the self (Park, et al. 2012). A consumer develops feelings and thoughts towards brands and a relationship and attachment is formed with the self. The feelings, which include affection, passion, and connection, are assigned to a brand is then compared to the consumer's self-concept (Dolich 1969; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer and Nyffenegger 2011). When products are consistent with a consumer's idea of his or her ideal self, it is referred to as self-congruency (Alex and Joseph 2012). Self-congruency is what makes the emotional brand attachment between a consumer and brand especially strong (Malär, et al. 2011). Self-image regulates behavior so, when a consumer meets their ideal self, they feel fulfilled (Dolich 1969). Self-congruency provides consumers with a sense of comfort (Malär, et al. 2011). As a result, the buying behavior is reinforced, thus consumers are prone to repeat the purchase of certain brands to get the same feelings (Dolich 1969).

The theoretical basis used to explain this phenomenon is found in *self-image congruence* models, which offer a popular approach to help explain consumer decision-making processes (Onkvisit and Shaw 1987; Coolsen and Kumashiro 2009). Self-congruency theory holds that consumers compare their self-concept with the image that a brand projects. Those brands that are consistent with their self-concept become preferred brands (Sirgy 1982; Parker 2009). Many studies have found supporting evidence for this user-image congruence effect (Dolich 1969; Erickson and Sirgy 1989, 1992).

The basis for the self-congruency theory stems from two psychological understandings. The first is the need to maintain or sustain a realized self-concept, which is defined as a set of beliefs about attitudes toward oneself (Aaker 1999). The second is a desire to engage in a realm that matches one's own schematic understanding. The notion of matching consumer and company likeness has been investigated and theorized as consumer-company identification (Carlson, Donovan, and Cumiskey 2009). Rooted in Social identity theory, *identification* is a process people come upon whereby they place themselves into a social context that is they identify their belonging within a social structure (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000). When people identify strongly with a social setting "there is an overlap between their self-schema and [that of the setting]" (Carlson et al. 372).

Compulsive buying tendencies are linked directly to brand attachment. Consumers become attached to brands when they feel connected with their ideal self. The happiness a consumer receives from buying products that increases their ego make them feel connected with their ideal self, thus encouraging brand attachment. Brand popularity increases the effect of compulsive buying tendencies on brand attachment. The more popular a brand is the more likely a consumer will have an attachment with it because of its association with popularity.

H_1: Compulsive buying tendencies and brand attachment are positively related.

H_2: Brand popularity positively affects the relationship between compulsive buying tendencies and brand attachment.
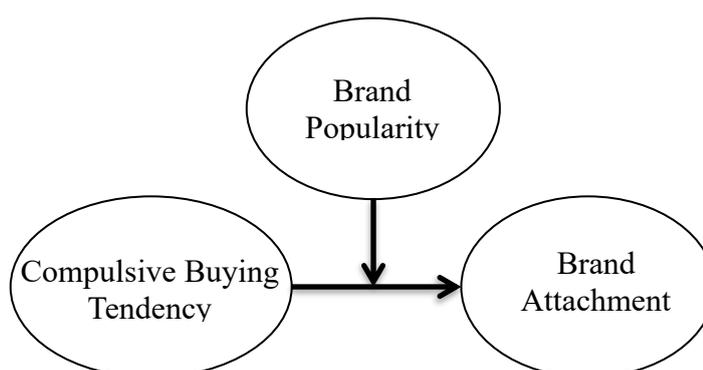

Figure 1: Compulsive Buying – Brand Attachment Model

3.0 Research Study

3.1 Method and Sample

This research surveys a broad sample of consumers employing an online instrument in an effort to minimize geographic and logistical participation barriers. Using the snowball sampling method (Zinkhan, Burton, and Wallendorf 1983), participants were recruited through contact information provided by upper division university students at a large-sized university in the Midwestern US. A noted deficiency of the snowball sampling method is

potential selection bias that is introduced when recruiters ask socially similar people to participate because of this subjects were carefully sought from a diverse age range. In addition, 12 survey participants were randomly selected and contacted by the authors as a validity check, ensuring the voracity of the data. The average age for the sample is 31.5 years (*S.D.* = 14.43). The sample is generally well educated (26.1% hold a bachelor's degree) and 57.2% have household income that exceeds $70k per year. Fifty responses were unusable due to incomplete answers leaving 246 valid observations.

3.2 Measures

To measure compulsive buying tendency we draw upon two separate scales Faber and O'Guinn (1992), and Edwards (1993). The scale includes seven Likert-Like statements to which respondents agreed or disagreed. In the exploratory factor analysis the scale met the minimal acceptable reliability threshold (.70, Churchill 1979) measured by Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach 1951) at .90. Additionally, all items loaded on a single factor at .61 or above (average loading of .79).

As the focal point in this study, respondents were asked to provide data concerning their personal attachment with a series of 66 different brands. Recently, a popular advertising campaign sought to humanize a focal brand as popular and trendy while characterizing their competitors as nerdy and out of date. For this focal brand (Macintosh™), the campaign used a cool, hip yet down to earth spokesperson that avidly proclaimed, "I'm a Mac." For their personified competitor (the PC) a middle-aged seemingly out of touch spokesperson admits, "I'm a PC." As a result of the clever juxtaposition of opposing brand images the focal brand (Macintosh™) effectively drew the observer into choosing sides by ultimately asking if they were a 'Mac' or 'PC.' Using this same design we asked respondents to indicate on a five-point likert-like scale the degree to which they identified with each brand. For the statement, "I am a Pizza Hut," individuals evaluate it they embody the likeness of Pizza Hut™ and agree, while those that don't will disagree. For the purpose of this research we have called this variable *brand attachment* (Louis and Lambert 2010). We use this variable similarly to Malär et al. (2011, pg. 36) who define emotional brand attachment as a reflection of "the bond that connects a consumer with a specific brand and involves feelings toward the brand." The choice of product categories was made after informal consumer interviews by the authors. Specific product categories were chosen based on familiarity to most consumers. Specific brands were then selected based on market share data within each product category (Market Share Reporter, 2009). Therefore, market share is used to measure brand popularity.

3.3 Results

To test our first hypotheses we measure the bivariate correlation between each respondent's compulsive buying tendency score and their average brand attachment. We find that they are positively and significantly correlated (r = .178, p = .003). In addition, we ran a bivariate regression and found that the resulting beta coefficient also to be also significant (*b* = .097, p = .003).

Table 1:
Consumer Buying Tendency Scale

Item	Exploratory Factor Analysis	Sample Mean (Std. Dev.)
Compulsive Buying Tendency (α = 0.90)		
1. I like to spend money.	0.61	3.02 (1.38)
2. I feel anxious or nervous on days I don't go shopping.	0.77	1.60 (0.99)
3. I feel driven to shop and spend, even when I don't have the time or money.	0.87	1.87 (1.17)
4. I think others would be horrified if they knew of my spending habits.	0.84	1.94 (1.23)
5. I go on buying binges.	0.83	2.13 (1.27)
6. Shopping is a way of relaxing and forgetting my problems.	0.83	2.20 (1.29)
7. I buy things even though I can't afford them.	0.81	2.01 (1.16)

To incorporate the effects of brand popularity we ran the same analysis based upon their market share rank. Thus, all products that are first in their product class by market share were grouped together followed by those products that were second, third and fourth. As a result both the correlation and regression coefficients describing the relationship between compulsive buying tendency and attachment were calculated while taking into account some measure of popularity. In Table 2 the average attachment is the respondent's average attachment score by product for each market share rank, while the correlation and beta coefficients (r and b, resp.) provide measures for the relationship they share.

Table 2:
Correlation and regression coefficients for CBT and brand attachment

Market Share Rank	Average attachment	r	b (sig.)
1	2.86	0.150	.251 (.001)
2	2.73	0.131	.207 (.027)
3	2.32	0.153	.247 (.009)
4	2.27	0.222	.378 (.000)

3.4 Interview Follow-up

In order to better understand the purposed model in this research we conducted a series of in depth interviews. The interviews were intended to gather information on the relationship of compulsive buying tendencies and brand attachment when moderated by brand popularity. A compulsive buying screening instrument was used to select the participants for the interviews. Participants whom scored about a 3.0 on a 5 point scale were selected to be in the study. The average interview time was 31:43 minutes. A strategic set of 26 questions was asked to better understand consumer-buying habits including: Do you

typically shop for fun or do you usually have a purpose?; Can you describe a time when you were shopping and you just had to buy something?; How does it make you feel when you buy your favorite brand?; and How do you feel when you wear popular brands? Each question was designed to measure the degree of either compulsive buying tendencies or brand attachment in each participant.

3.5 Interview Results

From our research there were several significant conclusions. Happiness after a purchase was a common theme expressed from participants. The questioned asked was, "When you're shopping for fun, how does it make you feel?" The answers from Vivian, Kayla, and Caroline mentioned the words, "happy" and "excited." Faber and Christensen (1996) validate this finding by explaining that positive feelings are felt immediately after shopping.

Guilt was a common theme expressed from participants about what they were buying, but they still continued to engage in the buying behavior. Participants were asked, "Do you ever feel guilty about shopping?" Common answers paralleled how Kayla responded, "Spending too much money on unnecessary items makes me feel guilty, but I still want to buy it because I like it and just need to have it." Lee expressed guilt for picking up extra items, but when asked, "Do you feel like that's a reoccurring thing?" he responded with, "Yeah, it happens every time. It's bad." This validates Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson's (2006) theory that following a purchase consumes feel guilt. This ties back to the Faber and Christensen (1996) theory of positive feelings only lasting for a temporary time period before negative feelings return to the consumer.

As mentioned before, people who have compulsive buying tendencies often are trying to enhance their self-esteem through their purchases (Faber and O'Guinn 1987). When a consumer feels a brand increases their self-esteem and brings them closer to their ideal self, a bond is formed (Dolich 1969). In the interviews, participants were asked, "How do you feel when you buy your favorite brand?' The answers from all participants reflected a common theme of a positive self-image. When Lee was asked that question, he answered "I feel stylish…it's like the in thing to wear." When answering the same question, Kayla describes her favorite brand as making her feel "more professional."

The last question in the interview was designed to measure brand attachment in regards to brand popularity. Participants were given three different brands in the same product category and asked to rank them as popular, neutral, or not popular. After the participant rated the brand, they were then asked to give an adjective of themselves using the product. When the participant rated the product as popular, the response time for the participant to give an adjective decreased by 10 seconds. The ease that participants answered popularly rated brands implies that the brand attachment is more accessible. The more meaning a brand has to a consumer the more accessible the brand is going to be too them (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Arpan-Ralstin and St. Pierre 2002). The adjectives that participants gave about different brands are shown in Table 3. The adjectives given for popular brands are thematically different than the adjectives given for neutral and not popular brands. Dolich describes brand attachment as feelings such as affection, passion, and connection (1969). The adjectives given for popular are more emotional and vary more than the other categories. In the popular category, adjectives include, "loyal," "upscale," "rich," and "trendy." These adjectives would positively reflect someone's self-concept of how they view themselves and how others view them. When a consumer feels their self-concept is congruent with their ideal self, emotional brand attachment and loyalty is created (Chaplin and John 2005; Park et al.

2010). The adjective used for the neutral and not popular categories are not desired by consumers, so self-congruency is not present making it less likely chance that meaningful brand attachment will occur (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer and Nyffenegger 2011).

Table 3:
Responses to "Is this brand popular, neutral, or not popular and what is an adjective you would use to describe yourself using the product?"

Popular	• Technologically advanced	• Athletic
	• Loyal	• Upscale
	• Innovative	• Fitting in with the crowd
	• Refreshing	• Upscale
	• Better than everyone else	• Reliable
	• "In" crowd	• Convenient
	• Rich	• Fashion conscious
	• Energized	• Trendy
	• Wired	• All-star
Neutral	• Regular	• Downgrade
	• Plain	• Older
	• Plain	• Couldn't splurge
	• Sporty	
	• Normal	
	• Outdated	
	• Compatible	
	• Average	
	• Watches money	
Not Popular	• Not technologically advanced	• Outcast
	• Boring	• Weird
	• Cheap	• Cheap
	• Not good	
	• Not good	
	• Kid-ish	
	• Not good	
	• Old	
	• Uncomfortable	

4.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this research is to develop an approach, then test the relationship between compulsive buying tendency and brand attachment when taking into account the influence of brand popularity. We find that compulsive buying and brand attachment are indeed positively related (supporting hypothesis one). However, the data results are unclear in regards to the role brand popularity plays. Brands ranked fourth demonstrate the strongest influence upon the compulsive buying and brand attachment relationship followed by those ranked third, then first and finally second. To support our second hypothesis the order of relationship strength should begin with the most popular brands followed by weaker ones thus, we fail to accept this hypothesis.

The research is important because the phenomenon of compulsive buying is very serious while brand power has come to play a significant role in both firm strategic planning and consumer decision-making processes. We theorize that compulsive buyers seek to improve the state of their actual self-image by gravitating toward brands that move them closer to their ideal self-image. By creating this self-image / brand-image congruence the product choice set allows the consumer to feel better about themselves, temporarily medicating their fragile psyche.

Future research in this area should continue to focus on the measurement of brand choice relative to key psychological traits such as propensity to behave compulsively, attitudes, feelings, and emotions. Moving forward other analysis methods will be used to overcome data constrictions associated with multi-collinearity.

The power wielded by a strong brand may also have confused respondents. All 66 brands are from 16 distinct product categories, however some brands have products in multiple non-related product categories and a brand halo affect is evident. Apple for instance is has the fourth strongest market share as a computer brand, yet its brand popularity in cell phones, MP3 devices and tablet computers far outweighs its market share stature in personal computers.

5.0 References

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