New research reveals the dark side of brand loyalty

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Credit: University of Portsmouth

New research is the first to establish the darker side of being devoted to your favourite brand.

As Christmas takes hold of the nation's wallets, the study reveals that people buy items from their beloved brands because it makes them feel good and reinforces an image of the kind of person they want to be. But this strong brand attachment can encourage excessive purchasing and impulse-buying.

This excessive material consumption may seem to be an advantage to the brand, however it can encourage [consumers](#) to rack up debts, threaten consumers' well-being and contribute to economic issues. Meanwhile the brands must face the consequences of their consumers being unable to pay but will continue purchasing their products. The research is published this month in the *Journal of Business Research*.

Professor of Marketing, Yuksel Ekinci, at the University of Portsmouth, said that this kind of over-consumerism is part of a psychological concept known as self-congruence – when a person's shopping habits and behaviour reflects an ideal version of themselves.

"Ideal self-congruence is when consumers find a good match between their ideal or desirable personality image e.g. sophisticated, posh, upper class, and a specific brand personality image. The more the similarity (or self-congruence) between their ideal personality and brand personality image, the stronger the connection between consumers and brands. This matching process stimulates brand attachment through emotional bonding and drives purchasing.

"Purchasing a specific brand is emotionally rewarding because it reflects back to the individual a similarity between their personality and the [brand image](#) or takes them closer to the image they aspire to be."

Self-enhancement motives may encourage someone on a modest income to purchase a designer handbag or eat in a smart restaurant because they see themselves as a person of higher economic status. Individuals whose actual self is humdrum and routine and would like to be more adventurous may purchase a fast car. Brands can represent who they wish to be and think they are deep down.

Professor Ekinci said: "Someone may feel they are an ordinary person – their actual self-image – but admire a person who is prestigious, elegant,

exclusive or upper class – their ideal self-image. Purchasing a brand such as Louis Vuitton that has an elegant, stylish and upper-class brand personality may match their ideal self-image, if not their actual personality. Their purchasing is motivated by ideal self-congruence and brand attachment rather than functional needs."

"There is an emotional bonding between a consumer and their brand of choice that feeds a person's self-image and helps them justify their purchases. At the point of sale their self-esteem rises and they feel cherished and valued."

Existing research suggests that material consumption is damaging to people's overall well-being -economically, socially and psychologically. Yet sophisticated marketing tactics such as clever advertising, product design, distribution or pricing draw people in.

Professor Ekinci also added that, while no-one expects big brands to change their tactics for the good of society, they would be wise to pay attention to their consumers' compulsive buying, since in the long run this could harm their brand image.

More information: Arnold Japutra et al. Self-congruence, brand attachment and compulsive buying, *Journal of Business Research* (2017). DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.08.024

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