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## **Exploring Consumer Fanaticism: Extraordinary Devotion in the Consumption Context**

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# Exploring Consumer Fanaticism: Extraordinary Devotion in the Consumption Context

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of fanaticism through qualitative in-depth interviews to learn about the characteristics associated with extraordinary devotion to consumptive objects. Findings showed inertial (addictive and obsessive-compulsive) elements associated with fanaticism, however, contrary to common portrayals, this is not always detrimental to the individual. It also showed that fanaticism involves managing the fine line between extreme levels of enthusiasm that is positive and fulfilling, versus non-sustainable borderline-dysfunctional levels of enthusiasm that may turn into something darker or problematic.

## EXTRAORDINARY CONSUMER DEVOTION

Volkswagen Beetle, Apple computers, Nike sportswear, Harley Davidson motorbikes, Louis Vuitton bags and purses, Manolo Blahnik shoes, Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Hello Kitty character-goods, and Martha Stewart magazines are just a few examples of brands enjoying a “cult-like” following (Belson and Bremner 2004; Hofman 2000; Rozanski, Baum and Wolfsen 1999; Wintour 2003). To many consumers, shoes serve a simple, functional need, but according to Wintour (2003, p.6), the editor-in-chief of Vogue Magazine, “Manolo Blahnik’s shoes inspire fanatical devotion”. Fans of Manolo Blahnik profess that they “fall at his feet and worship his temple” (Wintour 2003, p.73). *Sex and the City* actress Sarah Jessica Parker adds: “By now I can run a marathon in a pair of Manolo Blahnik heels. I can race out and hail a cab. I can run up Sixth Avenue at full speed. I’ve destroyed my feet completely, but I don’t really care. What do you need your feet for anyway?” (Wintour 2003, p.128). This illustrates not only the close bonds a consumer can form with brands, but also the fanatical nature of their loyalty to some brands.

Fanaticism is defined in this study as extraordinary devotion to an object, where “devotion” as conceptualised by Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007), consists of passion, intimacy, and dedication, and “extraordinary” implies going beyond the ordinary, usual, or average level (Taylor 1991). The “object” refers to “the object of fascination”, which can include a brand, product, person (e.g. celebrity), television show, or other consumption activities (e.g. sports) (Thorne and Bruner 2006).

Fanatics are inclined to insist their ideas are the correct ones, ignoring any facts or arguments that may conflict with their thoughts or beliefs (Perkinson 2002). Their enthusiasm is so extreme it is sometimes considered excessive (Passmore 2003). Examples of fanaticism to a brand, product, or activity can be found in seminal studies of extremely loyal, brand-worshipping consumers, such as core participants of brand communities, brand cults, and various subcultures of consumption (e.g. Belk and Tumbat 2005; Belk 2004; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Celsi 1992; Kozinets 2001; Kozinets 1997; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Troester 2002). Studies have shown that consumers can be extremely passionate about “their” sport or product to the extent of assigning them with sacred status (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Belk 2004; Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, Holbrook and Roberts 1988; Funk and James 2001; Oliver 1999;

Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Whang, Allen, Sahoury and Zhang 2004). Belk and Tumbat (2005) illustrated that some Macintosh users are so passionate about the brand that they take on missionary roles and recruit new users to the brand by insisting they are the better computers. Other extremely loyal brand users, as Muñiz and Schau’s (2005) study on the Apple Newton PDA (Personal Digital Assistants) community have shown, would ignore or even retaliate against suggestions to upgrade or switch to other brands.

Fanaticism is a unique form of loyalty characterised by strong, intense, and extreme levels of commitment, allegiance, devotion, passion, emotional attachment, enthusiasm, and involvement (Bristow and Sebastian 2001; Cova and Cova 2002; Funk and James 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Oliver 1999; Redden and Steiner 2000). A cross-disciplinary review of the existing (business, social psychology, politics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, and religion) literature on fanaticism have revealed that fanaticism is often considered a difficult concept to comprehend because the use of terms such as fans, fanatics, and fanaticism, have been inconsistent and confusing (Taylor 1991; Redden and Steiner 2000). As a result, there are uncertainties as to fanaticism’s core attributes, and conflicting views with regards to its dimensions. While some studies view fanaticism as normal, ordinary, and respectable (e.g. Bird 1999; Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw 1999; Jindra 1994), many others have portrayed fanaticism as being overly obsessive, excessive, extremist, intolerant, and incoherent (e.g. Gautier 2002; Hofman 2000; Perkinson 2002).

Much of the existing literature is dominated by negative portrayals of fanaticism, with suggestions that fanatics suffer psychological disorders and require psychotherapy (Ellis 1986; Firman and Gila 2002; Slobodzien n.d.). In the marketing context, literature on consumer fanatics also carries similar negative connotations. For example, Redden and Steiner (2000) suggested that fanatical consumers should be avoided because “fanatics don’t think like normal people” (p.337). Similarly, Rozanski et al. (1999) warns marketers that “fanatical followers” can become a brand’s greatest enemy if they feel defrauded by marketer actions (p.51). Indeed, Brown et al. (2003) showed that fanatical consumers can sometimes act as a barrier to marketer activities, such as brand relaunch.

Although fanaticism has often been portrayed in a negative light, this paper suggests that a more comprehensive account of the phenomenon requires an open-minded approach that is not heavily skewed towards the disapproval of fanatics. Fanatical consumers could be regarded as valuable customers of a brand for a variety of reasons. For example, some fanatics have extreme and passionate consumption drives, which imply heavy usage and purchase patterns (Hofman 2000). They can act as opinion leaders to bring others’ attention to the brand and attract new customers (Rifkin 1999). Furthermore, fanatics will go to great personal and financial lengths to support a brand, such as by joining and actively participating in brand communities or fan cultures (Funk 1998; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). Their support is consistent, persistent, and resistant to any attempts at reducing this attachment, which includes the active disregard of marketing messages from competitor brands

(James 1997). Hugenberg (2002) suggests that organisations become “wealthy as a result of fan loyalty” (p.178). Therefore, the phenomenon of consumer fanaticism deserves much needed research attention, which will also contribute towards the existing understanding of loyalty.

A recent study by Thorne and Bruner (2006) identified and provided empirical support for a set of four characteristics of consumer fanaticism (said to be common to fans even across different areas of fanaticism or fan genres): internal involvement, external involvement, a desire for interaction with others, and a wish to acquire source-related material. The identification of these characteristics (which are not loaded with negativity as they often were in the preceding discussions of consumer fanaticism) was important to draw stigma away from the phenomenon and to encourage further research in the area which is still at its early stage. It is proposed that exploration of fanaticism should be open to, and considers all (positive and negative) elements associated with the phenomenon.

### METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to further explore the characteristics and qualities of consumer fanaticism. To do so, it is important to obtain an intimate understanding of consumer fanatics. The collection of life stories were thought to be most appropriate as they can provide in-depth understanding of an individual’s past experiences that may have shaped who they are today (Atkinson 1998; Atkinson 2002; Douglas, Roberts, and Thompson 1988; Rosenthal 2005). The collection of life stories took the form of in-depth face-to-face interviews, which led informants chronologically through their lives, from childhood, through adolescence, and to adulthood, examining issues, events, and people associated with the phenomenon of interest.

The interviews were conducted over the course of eight months on a sample of consumers who were reported as ‘fanatics’ or have experienced the ‘fanatic’ label. Five individuals were recruited via purposive sampling, as interviewer-informant familiarity can enhance candour and emotional openness when the subject matter may be sensitive, particularly due to the stigma associated with the ‘fanatic’ label (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). Informants were interviewed up to five hours each, which was audio taped. Verbatim transcripts were created, and life stories were constructed, where analysis was performed via line-by-line scrutiny of data, in order to uncover new concepts and novel relationships, and to systematically develop theoretical categories (Cavana, Delahaye, and Sekaran 2001; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Data analysis was conducted based on the qualitative manipulation operations described by Spiggle (1994).

Various strategies were adopted through this study to enhance the rigor of the qualitative research. This was achieved by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were addressed by subjecting the raw data, data analysis, and data interpretations to triangulation (via corroboration between crosschecked data, and the relevant literature) and subject review (where some participants reviewed the data interpretations and findings) at various stages of the research process.

### FINDINGS

The aim of this section is not to report on the life stories collected. Rather, it draws on selected consumer testimonials that best illustrate the emerging themes gathered from the data, representing some common characteristics and qualities of fanaticism.

#### Extraordinary Loyalty & Devotion

Extraordinary loyalty and devotion implies attachment that is beyond the usual, average, or ordinary level. Loyalty and devotion

implies that fanaticism is beyond simple engagements between the consumer and the object (Funk 1998; Funk and James 2001; Funk, Haugtvedt and Howard 2000). That is, the notion of loyalty and devotion considers not simply the frequency of participation, such as usage or purchase patterns, but involves emotional attachments such as feelings of passion and love, intimacy and dedication as described by Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007) and Ahuvia (2005). This can be illustrated through Whitney’s (AF27) testimonials about her love of luxury fashion brands:

Whitney... “One of my big things is handbags. Absolutely *adore* handbags... I currently have one Gucci and two Louis Vuitton’s, which I love, love, love, love, love... I value clothes and shoes and bags more than things like food (laughs)... I love them to pieces, I probably used them about only ten times each ‘cause I don’t want to damage them... they’re like my little babies. They’re so precious to me. If anything happened to them I’ll be so upset, I really would be devastated... I won’t even carry my bag if I have moisturiser on my hands, because I don’t want anything tarnishing or tinting it... And then, if I get in the car with it, it sits on my lap, I won’t put it on the seat, or on the floor, it stays on my lap.”

This example illustrates the love Whitney feels towards the product, and her extraordinary devotion to them, including an enthusiasm that is beyond the average, usual, or ordinary level. Her enthusiasm is beyond average because many, including her friends, do not understand her obsession or excitement. She claimed that her mother “would die if she knew how much I spent on one of those bags”.

Whitney’s extraordinary devotion to these products can also be illustrated by the extreme level of care used to handle them, and the protection she gives them:

Whitney... “I can spot a fake a mile away. I get really angry... uni(versity) girls or high school girls carry(ing) fake LV (Louis Vuitton)... I want to just *scream* at them... (my cousins) will go why would you spend six hundred dollars on a bag (when you can get an imitation for ten dollars)? I get *reeeeally* offended, and really pissed off”

Whitney gets worked up and emotional, and appeared angry as she described and demonstrated her ferocious protection of the brand. Such passion is beyond ordinary levels considering she has also made sacrifices in her pursuit of these brands, and actively recruits new admirers to the brand:

Whitney... “(I) will stop at nothing to get it... I would eat cheap food. Or, not eat. I just find ways to save money. So that I can (make these purchases)... even essential stuff, like fixing my car, my contact lenses, I would go without... If I go for lunch with my friends and we’re just like half a block away, I’ll be like, let’s go into (the) LV (store) and have a look... I’m slowly getting (my boyfriend) into it... I’m slowly breaking him in ‘cause I just talk about it so much... there needs to be more people that understands ‘cause I need more people to talk to about it and obsess about it ‘cause I get really excited”

The recruitment of new users to the brand also illustrates Whitney’s extraordinary devotion to the brand. It is a unique behaviour usually displayed by devoted consumers (Fournier and Yao 1997; Pimentel and Reynolds 2004; Rifkin 1999; Rozanski et al. 1999; Thorne and Bruner 2006).

Ashley (CF27) is a fanatical toy collector. She used to work at a toyshop, and currently works at a toy warehouse. She has an

enormous collection (into the “thousands” number of items) that spans across at least three rooms of the family home, as well as other areas such as the garage and shed, toilet, kitchen and dining areas, as well as the car. Of the three rooms, all surrounding wall space is covered by toys (top to bottom, and even the ceilings), and one of them has only minimal standing space, and can no longer be used as a bedroom. Ashley compares her level of fanaticism with that of her brother’s:

Ashley... “I consider myself devoted, extremely loyal... I spend a lot of money on toys... I’ve got a lot of shrines and they’re basically just trying to show the toys better... I did that at the toyshop [which she worked for, for four years]... I really took great pride in it. A lot of people at toyshops do it for a job but I’d make sure that all the Mattel stuff was all together and I’d make sure that all the Spiderman stuff was there... I missed my toys... I missed looking at them... I don’t have time to set them up properly and I really want to but I can’t really take time off work to set up my toys. Does that make me non-fanatical now?... I’m not as fanatical, Ben is a definite fanatic yeah he is... he’s quite fanatical. And I sort of got caught up through it through him... ‘cause’ he’s got such a passion for it... You should talk to him and you won’t be able to shut him up if he starts talking about his toys and you will never, ever shut him up...”

Ashley explained that she misses her toys when she is away from them, which illustrates a strong level of emotional attachment to them. She feels that they need to be organised “properly” (e.g. into shrines of similar toys), but appears to be torn as she does not have the time to do so. Although, Ashley clearly shows devotion to toys beyond the ordinary level, she classifies herself as being less fanatical than her brother whom she believes initiated her interest and love of toys. This suggests that perhaps various forms or levels of fanaticism may exist to characterise different levels and extent of devotion to an object.

### Extreme Enthusiasm

Fanaticism often involves such extreme behaviours, and is often at such a high level of intensity that sometimes its pursuit cannot be sustained over long periods of time (in which case, the consumer may take a temporary break from his or her involvement). For this reason, much of the existing literature on fanatics has dismissed fanatics and fanatical behaviour as being “crazed” while mistakenly portraying it as being detrimental, destructive, dysfunctional, or counter-productive (Faber, O’Guinn and Krych 1987; Pollay 1987; Redden and Steiner 2000; Steiner 2004). Although sometimes arguably detrimental if sustained over long periods of time, the data showed that the consumer is often conscious and aware of this, and tends to exercise self-control to avoid any morbid or excessively negative consequences. For example, Anthony (AM24), who is a car model collector, explained:

Anthony... “Car collection, it takes up most of my time, and most of my money as well. So I’m definitely devoted as such. Got over five hundred car models, and it doesn’t seem like it’s going to slow down anytime soon... (It’s) a financial drain at this stage, losing all the money... I’m probably a little more crazy than I should be about cars... I’ve been trying to go on a mission of 90 days not-buying-a-car-model ‘cause I was literally buying around two or three models a week. It was just getting out of hand. My room is just full of cars. And even then half of them are packed up in the boxes ‘cause I have no space in my room.”

Since Anthony feels that his involvement has reached a point of being “a bit too high”, he tried to control it by consciously avoiding purchases for a set timeframe. This is his temporary escape from the intense level of involvement in his pursuit, which may otherwise be difficult to sustain over long periods of time.

Ashley’s comments also demonstrated an awareness of the non-sustainable aspect of her extreme enthusiasm for toys:

Ashley... “I spend a lot of money on toys... It’s not ridiculous. If I need to spend money on something else that week, then I’ll spend it on something else... I’ve had friends who think I’m crazy because they go, how can you spend all your money on that and not save up to buy a car or something. I’m like, well, it makes me happy... Some things I have to hold back on though. When I started my job at the toyshop, I had to *not* collect Beanie Kids because you know Beanie Kids, there’s millions of them. I couldn’t start or else I would have just gone broke but the bad thing was that my Canadian friends, I got them Beanie Kids when they went away and one of their presents back to me was a Beanie Kid and I’m like, no! You can’t give me a Beanie Kid because now I have to start collecting them! So I’ve got four now and I’m very controlled.”

Ashley appears to be aware of aspects of toy collecting that may lead to negative consequences, and manages her toy collecting carefully to avoid these circumstances. She is sensible with her spending, and would prioritise her expenses and responsibilities before attending to her toy purchases and acquisitions. These examples show that perhaps consumers who exercise self-control can avoid fanaticism turning into the darker and potentially problematic forms often portrayed in the existing literature on fanaticism.

### Inertial Involvement & Behaviour

Another reason fanaticism is often dismissed as dysfunctional is that it is sometimes associated with elements of obsessive-compulsive consumption and addiction-like behaviours (e.g. DePaulo, Rubin and Milner 1987; Redden and Steiner 2000; Scammon 1987). Addiction and obsessive-compulsive behaviours are often considered disorders that are intrusive to individuals and ultimately cause harm to them or to others (Doran and Kyrios 2005; Hirschman 1992; Moulding and Kyrios 2006; Pollak 1986). The data showed that consumer fanaticism often involves addictive and compulsive elements:

Anthony... “Sometimes I feel compelled to buy. Sometimes I just feel like I need to buy for the sake of buying. But that’s only been a couple of times... It sometimes gets (to the point of being) like somebody who is suffering from obsessive compulsive behaviour, it sometimes can be like that, where you’re just buying for the sake of buying, not actually enjoying the model or the car, the purpose of it is totally defeated, you can’t control it.”

Anthony’s descriptions appear to fit the definition of compulsive consumption, “a response to an uncontrollable drive to obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance, or activity that leads an individual to repeatedly engage in a behaviour” (Hirschman 1992, p.158). However, rather than conceptualising this as a form of “uncontrollable” or compulsive behaviour, which often carries negative connotations because compulsive consumption is linked to consequences that “ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or to others” (Hirschman 1992, p.158), it may be more appropriate

to view this as a form of inertial behaviour—a drive or desire to interact with the consumptive object, which is not always linked to negative outcomes detrimental to the individual or to others.

Anthony... “There are different ways of being addicted. One is really extreme where you set up your house or whatever and you literally are just living for the thing, like the car, that sort of addiction takes a negative turn. The other addiction is probably (to do with being) a little bit more than obsessed about it. You constantly go looking for it to buy rather than being in the surrounding. In my case, I actually go to hobby shops and look for new hobby shops to find the particular car model if I’m after something. So I am so far in the positive addiction because it hasn’t affected me negatively to the point where I’m putting all my social commitments around the collection or postponing a house or mortgage or anything like that because I need to buy that car model. So far it hasn’t reached that.”

Anthony’s involvement with car model collecting appears to qualify as a form of process addiction, defined as “a series of activities or interactions that “hook” a person, or on which a person becomes dependent” (Schaeff and Fassel 1988, p.58). For example, he feels compelled to buy through the inertia of fanaticism, and is hooked onto the act of constantly seeking out hobby shops to find and buy car models. He also shows other characteristics of addiction detailed in Schaeff and Fassel (1988), including the tendency to deny the presence of the effect of addictions. For example, Anthony claims that car model collecting “has not affected me negatively to the point where I’m... postponing a house or mortgage”, yet he has been unable to accumulate enough savings to take out a mortgage for the purchase of a house (and in effect, *has* placed buying a house on hold). The tendency to see addictive behaviour and processes as normal is another characteristic of addiction (Schaeff and Fassel 1988). This can be seen in Anthony’s suggestion of “I am so far in the positive addiction”. Isolation and the illusion of control are also characteristics of addiction (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Schaeff and Fassel 1988), and are evident in Anthony’s explanations of “I like my own company a little more”, and his attempts at enforcing rules (i.e. control) over not buying car models. His attempt at enforcing rules on purchasing is an illusion of control because Anthony has been unsuccessful at several attempts to curb his purchases.

It is important to note that contrary to common portrayals of addiction and obsessive-compulsive behaviours, the consequences here are not as morbid and detrimental as that resulting from pathological addiction (such as to drugs or alcohol), or other forms of consumer addiction (e.g. in DePaulo et al. 1987; Faber et al. 1987; Hirschman 1992). The data showed that some forms of fanaticism do not necessarily result in the same severe negative consequences that are generally associated with addiction and obsessive-compulsion. For example, Anthony’s fanaticism has not had a detrimental effect on other areas of his life (i.e. it has not interfered with his ability to meet everyday responsibilities and performance at work). However, a stigma attached to the term ‘fanatic’ is apparent, with Anthony’s refusal to be labelled one.

Anthony... “If I was a true fanatic, it’s like my house would be shaped like a car, my bed would be like a car, I’ll always wear something with a car on it... or my pen would be designed by Porsche or something like that. I haven’t reached that stage yet. I think that’s my definition, like, everything around you is just a reminder of what you’re interested in... sometimes I think being a complete fanatic means you are entering a bit of negativity”.

Although Anthony does not see himself as a fanatic, who he defines as someone that surrounds themselves with reminders of their interest, it was revealed that he in fact always keeps reminders of car models near him; two miniature car models which are kept in his bag and which he takes into the office everyday. He called this his “security blanket”; making him a fanatic by his own definition.

### Consumption as an “End to Itself”

In an attempt to define fanatic consumption, Lehmann (1987) suggested that “a fanatic devotee of anything continues the activity at least partly because the activity is an end to itself” (p.129). Evidence of consumption as an end to itself in fanaticism can be found in conversations with Ashley. In relation to her toy collection, Ashley explains that she thinks “it would be good to have a goal with it”, such as being able to build a toy museum “to show the toys better”, however, she comes to the realisation and describes toy collecting and its display and maintenance as “a never ending thing” and that “there’s no end. None at all”.

Anthony’s comments also illustrated fanaticism as a consumption activity continued at least partly as an end to itself:

Anthony... “There’s no goal in it... with a book there is a goal, once you start you have to finish it. With the car model collection, it’s like, I don’t see an end as such just yet. The fun hasn’t gone yet. So I’ll keep doing it until it starts to bore me. But I don’t think that’ll happen anytime soon”

In Anthony’s case, he collects car models simply for the sake of having them and being able to have more of them close to him. This may resemble materialism, in that the acquisition of products may appear “mindless” and without purpose (Richins 2004; Richins, McKeage and Najjar 1992). However, consumption as an end in itself emphasises the experiential aspect of consumption, such as the fun aspect of the act of collecting (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), whereas materialism emphasises the endlessly increasing goals of material acquisition and possession (Richins 2004; Richins et al. 1992). Contrary to materialism, Anthony’s collecting is not driven by the goal of acquiring *more* car models, but it is done for fun and for having them near him as his “security blanket”. Similarly, Jonathan (CM28), a self-confessed sports fanatic, explained:

Jonathan... “(Sports is) more an end to itself rather than anything else, and I just do it because I enjoy it...sometimes you play sport for fitness and stuff like that, I do that sometimes, but most of the times, it’s just to enjoy it and do something that I like doing”.

Jonathan used to train as a junior professional golfer, but he gave up golfing in high school due to the excessive pressure and the lack of enjoyment. He stopped playing golf for many years before “picking up” the sport again upon entering the workforce. He now plays golf frequently as a form of leisure activity, and is a fan of a football club, soccer team, and golf in general. Jonathan believes he is “brand loyal to sports” because he would “spend over half of the time that I’ve got remaining left in my life that I could spend on something, on sport” (e.g. “if I took out work and sleep and then daily chores and things like that, then of the remaining time, be whatever it is, I reckon I’d spend 60 to 70 percent of that time watching sport or doing something to do with sport and then I’d probably drill into some of that at work”). Similar to other consumer fanatics, Jonathan believes there are no goals driving his extreme devotion to sports. He “love(s) the side [i.e. his favourite team], and still love the sport... no matter how well or how poorly the sides are doing”. His passion for sport is simply driven by the enjoyment it

brings. This suggests that fanaticism may be driven by the experiential (such as the intangible, non-utilitarian, symbolic, and hedonic) aspects of consumption, and that the process of consumption is intimately linked and may form part of the fanatic's goal of consumption. Thus, to better understand consumer fanaticism, research should not only focus on the consumer's enjoyment of the product, but also explore the associated process(es), as well as the underlying goals driving consumption.

### Personal Self-Sustaining Phenomenon

Much of the existing literature places extreme brand loyalty in a social context of brand communities or consumption cultures (e.g. Belk and Tumbat 2005; Clesi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Kozinets 2001; Kozinets 1997; McAlexander, Kim and Roberts 2003; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Oliver 1999; Rifkin 1999; Rifkin 1997a; Rifkin 1997b; Shouten and McAlexander 1995). However, there is evidence to suggest that fanaticism can be an intensely personal phenomenon, which can occur in the absence of a group or social context. This departs from Oliver's (1999) proposal of the "ultimate loyalty state" (which is said to occur when community and social support provides the "impetus to remain loyal" (p.38)), because a consumer fanatic can be just as loyal without the support from their surrounding social network or community. This was shown in Whitney's case of continued devotion to luxury brands despite her friends' and mother's disapproval. She shows little care for what others may think, and would even be offended if someone criticises her extreme involvement. She explained:

Whitney... "They don't know anything about it and for them to just say something insulting. It's offensive to me. Even my own relatives, like I said to you before, when my cousin said bad stuff (about Louis Vuitton), I get really offended. I get defensive. I would fully argue with them... because I spend so much money on it, I take so much pride in caring for it, and for you to just insult it like that, is a direct insult to me. It would be as if someone said your baby was ugly"

Whitney's extreme devotion to the brand continues despite disapproval from her cousin. She also claims to have no friends that share her passion, explaining that she would like "more people that understands". This illustrates that her enthusiasm for the brand can be sustained even without a supporting social network. Similarly, Anthony's car model collecting is private because he will not actively reveal his passion to others:

Anthony... "Definitely more of a personal thing... (because) it's not like I'm trying to build a social club or a network... Socially, I have friends and stuff, but I like my own company a little more (laughs)"

Anthony does not participate in collectors' communities and would rarely show others his collection. Furthermore, his extreme devotion to car model collecting pervades without a supporting social network. This suggests that extreme devotion and loyalty to brands is not limited to only occurring in social contexts.

## DISCUSSION

The exploration of consumer fanaticism has led to further insights into the characteristics and qualities associated with this phenomenon, which were identified to include extraordinary loyalty and devotion, extreme enthusiasm, inertial (addictive and obsessive-compulsive) involvement, and consumption as an end to itself. The findings showed that fanaticism is characterised by high

levels of loyalty and devotion that is beyond the average, usual, or ordinary level. The consumer has a strong emotional attachment to the object, which is associated with feelings of passion, love, and dedication as described in Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007) and Ahuvia (2005). However, the notion of extraordinary loyalty and devotion alone do not seem adequate in capturing the phenomenon of consumer fanaticism. Fanaticism seems to also be characterised by intense levels of enthusiasm and involvement so extreme it comes close to the dysfunctional borderline. Findings showed that the consumer fanatic's involvement can reach a point of being "too high" that, if sustained over long periods of time, may result in negative consequences. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the fanatic is aware of this and consciously attempts to control his or her involvement in order to prevent fanaticism turning into something darker or problematic (although some has shown to struggle occasionally).

The findings also showed that fanaticism involves addictive and compulsive elements, where the consumer feels "compelled to buy". However, contrary to common descriptions of addiction and obsessive-compulsive behaviours, the inertial involvement aspect of fanaticism does not usually lead to morbid consequences that are detrimental to the consumer or harms others.

It appears that consumer fanatics tend to sometimes engage in consumption at least partly as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end (Lehmann 1987). Although consumption as an end in itself can resemble materialism, where consumers consume for the sake of increasing material wealth and possession, consumption as an end in itself in the context of consumer fanaticism does not always involve acquisition of (more) products. This suggests that perhaps some consumer fanatics may be attracted to the experiential aspects of the consumption activity. Future research should further explore the experiential and intangible components, such as the feelings and emotions, associated with the enthusiastic pursuit of a passion.

The characteristics and qualities of consumer fanaticism identified in this study is different to those identified by Thorne and Bruner (2006) in that the characteristics proposed here emphasise the high levels of intensity and the strong emotional elements that are unique to and representative of consumer fanaticism. We feel that it is important to include the quality of "going beyond ordinary levels" towards extreme and almost borderline-dysfunctional forms of enthusiasm and devotion, in order to capture the phenomenon of consumer fanaticism more accurately.

This study led to some explanations for the stigma often associated with the phenomenon of fanaticism. For example, its close resemblance to addiction and obsessive-compulsive behaviours has led to the common mistake of dismissing it as a disorder. This suggests a need for future research to focus on the non-dysfunctional forms of fanaticism, especially because there is much need to understand the drivers and transitions that lead consumers to extreme levels of loyalty. For example, Oliver (1999) who developed a brand loyalty framework suggested a need to understand the "transitioning mechanisms" that move consumers to the state of ultimate loyalty where they "become near-zealots on the basis of adoration and devotion" towards the brand. Similarly, the need to investigate how individuals result at the "apex" of loyalty is emphasised in other conceptual papers (e.g. Funk and James 2001; Hunt et al. 1999).

The findings also revealed that fanaticism is not limited to only occurring in a social or group context as portrayed in much of the existing (e.g. brand communities and consumption subcultures) literature capturing extreme loyalty. New insights can be discovered through extending existing research with an alternative approach of exploring extreme loyalty and devotion to consumptive

objects that occurs in the absence of community or social support. Such intense and private interactions with brands have been overlooked (Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007). Questions that remain unanswered include: How does it sustain and why does it continue if there are no social drivers or motivators? Many have studied fans as a collective, showing social reasons for extreme devotion, however, without social reasons of obligation and conformity based on the desire for group acceptance, why do consumers continue to be so devoted? An exploration of the non-social influences that drive individual consumer fanatics' transition towards extreme loyalty and devotion will provide interesting insights.

Research conducted for this paper is exploratory, and further investigation is required to extend our understanding of this phenomenon. In particular, what drives and sustains this unique and extraordinary level of loyalty and devotion is still unclear (Funk and James 2001; Hunt et al. 1999; Oliver 1999). It is recommended that future research should be based on the collection of life stories, as this method allows exploration of the history of the individual and the influences that give rise to their involvement as a fanatic (Taylor 1991), thus allowing us to understand one's developmental progression towards fanaticism. Insights on the developmental progression towards fanaticism will also contribute towards the existing understanding of the loyalty construct.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to explore the phenomenon of consumer fanaticism in order to bring clarity to our understanding of its nature, characteristics, and qualities. This study found that the key defining quality of fanaticism is a strong emotional attachment in the form of loyalty and devotion beyond the ordinary, usual, or average level, coupled with levels of enthusiasm and involvement so extreme, it may be difficult to sustain over long periods of time, and can be considered close to the borderline of being "dysfunctional". Fanaticism appears to also have addictive and obsessive-compulsive aspects, but evidence suggests that this can be controlled by the individual to avoid any severely negative consequences, and thus, unlike many existing portrayals, fanaticism do not usually cause harm to the consumer and to others. It is proposed that further research into consumer fanaticism is necessary, particularly for understanding the development and drivers of extreme levels of loyalty and devotion. This will allow bridging gaps and consolidating conflicting views amongst different disciplines particularly in terms of the positive and negative aspects of fanaticism.

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