

Mainstream Fatigue: A Novel Psychological Mechanism for Understanding Brand Switching

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KEYWORDS <i>mainstream fatigue; satiation; brand switching; brand inertia</i>	ABSTRACT Brand loyalty is a core asset for businesses, yet consumers often switch brands even when no critical issues arise with their habitual brand. Traditional theories fail to fully explain this phenomenon. This study introduces "mainstream fatigue," a psychological effect wherein prolonged exposure to a brand leads to diminished interest and a desire for novelty. Through three empirical studies ($N = 1031$), we demonstrate that cognitive satiation directly drives brand switching by reducing interest in a brand's functional attributes, while emotional satiation influences brand switching through its interaction with cognitive satiation. Mainstream fatigue mediates the effect of cognitive satiation on brand switching, highlighting the depletion of psychological resources. Furthermore, brand inertia mitigates switching behaviors by counteracting mainstream fatigue. This research provides a dynamic perspective on brand loyalty, extends theories of brand switching, and offers actionable strategies for improving brand management and customer retention in competitive markets...
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1. INTRODUCTION

In the second decade of the 21st century, the cost of acquiring customers has continued to rise, making user loyalty a core asset for brands. However, the phenomenon of consumers abandoning loyal brands to try new ones has become increasingly prevalent. For instance, the cost of acquiring a new customer in 2021 was 222% higher than it was eight years earlier (Simplicity DX, 2021). Additionally, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 71% of consumers have switched brands at least once (Stackla, 2021). This phenomenon of "brand switching" has emerged as a critical challenge in the context of intense market competition.

Existing research, predominantly based on the rational actor hypothesis, attributes brand switching to external factors. For example, classical economic theories posit that consumers aim to maximize functional utility (Hsieh et al., 2021; Naylor et al., 2012), while classical social psychology emphasizes that consumers use brand choices to achieve identity alignment (Grewal et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2010). Additionally, some studies have explored the phenomenon of "brand mistakes," such as product quality issues or failure to meet user expectations (Hsiao et al., 2015; Rahman et al., 2021). However, these theories struggle to explain consumer attrition when no apparent brand errors occur. For instance, although iPhones are widely adored by users, some still switch to Android devices. In preliminary interviews, users described this phenomenon with statements like, "Even though my iPhone is great, I just want to try something new" (Nyame, 2023). This suggests that brand switching may also involve deep-seated internal psychological motivations.



To address this, the present study introduces and extends the "mainstream fatigue" effect, initially proposed by Wenyan Niu (2017), to explain brand switching in the absence of apparent brand errors. The "mainstream fatigue" effect highlights how prolonged use of a single brand depletes psychological resources, leading to a desire for new goals and experiences. Unlike the static boredom explored in satiation research (Park & Jang, 2014) or the external allure emphasized in variety-seeking studies (Febiastuti & Nawarini, 2018), mainstream fatigue focuses on the dynamic process of psychological resource depletion. It examines how the progressive exhaustion of emotional and cognitive resources following satiation drives brand switching behaviors. Moreover, this study investigates the moderating role of brand inertia in the mainstream fatigue effect, providing theoretical foundations and practical intervention points for businesses to prevent user attrition and maintain brand loyalty. This research not only offers a novel psychological mechanism for understanding brand switching but also provides an innovative perspective for the study of brand loyalty.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Mainstream Fatigue as a Human Physiological and Psychological Phenomenon and Its Impact on Brand Switching

The term "mainstream fatigue" first appeared in *Introduction to Social Physics* by Wenyan Niu (2017) to describe the psychological cycle wherein individuals gradually lose enthusiasm after achieving a goal and develop a desire to pursue new objectives. This effect reflects the human behavioral pattern of "seeking novelty – settling into routine – pursuing new goals," which applies not only to individual behavior but also to the cyclical changes in social and cultural phenomena. Although Niu did not explicitly explain the reasoning behind the use of the term "mainstream," it is inferred that it refers to the core goals or values commonly pursued by individuals. The diminishing appeal of these goals over time leads to a sense of weariness, which subsequently drives individuals to seek new targets.

Some existing research has explored similar phenomena under the umbrella of "consumer fatigue," but most focus on the effects of external factors. From the perspective of media promotion, studies suggest that information overload and the complexity of choices in online shopping can lead to consumer confusion and exhaustion (J.-O. Kim, 2021). Similarly, brand content overload or intrusive advertising may diminish brand loyalty (Lin & Wang, 2023). From the behavioral operations perspective, frequent information searches can result in fatigue due to high search costs (Ursu et al., 2023). From the perspective of product usage experience, while high-tech products often attract consumers with their rich features, their complexity and low usability can lead to disappointment and fatigue during the usage phase (Fürst et al., 2024).

However, these studies primarily focus on consumer fatigue from the perspective of external environmental factors, overlooking the role of internal psychological changes. This study posits that mainstream fatigue is an endogenous psychological phenomenon that emphasizes the natural shifts within consumers' minds. Even in the absence of significant external stimuli, consumers may experience mainstream fatigue due to satiation, the depletion of cognitive and emotional resources, and a growing desire for new goals. This perspective complements the limitations of external factor-based research by uncovering the deeper psychological mechanisms underlying consumer behavior. It provides a novel theoretical framework for understanding brand switching.

The Psychological Dimensions of Mainstream Fatigue: Sensory Adaptation, Cognitive and Emotional Exhaustion, and Novelty Seeking

As discussed, mainstream fatigue is an endogenous psychological phenomenon reflecting the diminishing attraction and loss of interest that consumers experience due to prolonged exposure to a habitual brand. While Niu (2017) did not deconstruct the psychological essence of mainstream fatigue in his work, this study proposes that four psychological mechanisms—sensory adaptation, cognitive exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, and novelty seeking—constitute its core essence. These mechanisms encompass the entire psychological process of consumer interaction with a brand, from sensory stimulation to emotional connection, and reveal the dynamic logic behind the diminishing appeal of a brand. Compared to other potential psychological factors (e.g., short-term preference shifts or external environmental influences), these mechanisms more directly reflect the gradual depletion of consumers' internal psychological resources and their strong desire for novel experiences. Together, they form the fundamental nature of mainstream fatigue.

Sensory Adaptation is a widely recognized physiological and psychological mechanism in which sensory systems gradually reduce their responsiveness to repetitive stimuli, prompting individuals to shift their attention to new changes (Merchie & Gomot, 2023). In the consumer domain, sensory adaptation is frequently triggered. For instance, standardized brand messaging and repeated advertising exposure often lead consumers to lose interest in the brand, resulting in a state of "desensitization" (Douc  & Adams, 2020; Schmidt & Eisend, 2015). In the information-dense digital environment, this adaptive process causes consumers to become increasingly indifferent to brand stimuli while fostering greater anticipation for new experiences (Rocklage et al., 2021). However, sensory adaptation is not synonymous with "negative fatigue." Its essence lies in a reduced sensitivity to repeated stimuli, laying the foundation for subsequent cognitive and emotional changes (J.-H. Kwon et al., 2021).



Cognitive Exhaustion refers to the state in which consumers struggle to sustain attention due to the depletion of information-processing resources (Agrawal et al., 2022). In the context of repeated brand messaging and advertising exposure, consumers' cognitive resources are gradually drained, leading to diminished interest in the brand (Zhou et al., 2023). However, cognitive resource depletion may not solely result from "information overload"; familiarity itself can contribute to cognitive strain. While familiar brand stimuli often reduce cognitive load through automatic processing, prolonged exposure to highly repetitive information can trigger psychological boredom, diminishing the brand's appeal (M. Becker & Gijsenberg, 2023). This apparent contradiction requires a more precise explanation: cognitive exhaustion is more likely to reflect the monotony experienced at a cognitive level with familiar brands, rather than the outright depletion of resources.

Emotional Exhaustion arises from the depletion of emotional resources during consumer-brand interactions. While immersive experiences and personalized recommendations can strengthen emotional connections, excessive emotional stimulation may become an emotional burden, leading consumers to lose their positive responsiveness to the brand (Cohen et al., 2024). The core of emotional exhaustion lies in the "overfrequency of interactions," which causes emotional connection fatigue and reflects the psychological evolution from emotional engagement to emotional depletion (Petit et al., 2019). Cognitive exhaustion and emotional exhaustion often do not occur in isolation but rather interact and reinforce each other. Cognitive resource depletion and information overload can exacerbate emotional exhaustion, and together they drive consumer detachment from the brand (Sheng et al., 2023).

Novelty Seeking reflects consumers' preference for novel and innovative stimuli and originates from the theory of variety-seeking (Clewett et al., 2017). When consumers experience adaptive satiation with existing brand stimuli, novelty seeking motivates them to actively pursue new brands or products (L. Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Studies suggest that this desire enhances consumers' perceived subjective benefits of innovative products while reducing sensitivity to associated risks (Dai & Wang, 2023). For instance, novelty seeking prompts social media users to imitate the consumption behavior of opinion leaders, trying out new brands (Mardhatilah et al., 2023). This mechanism becomes particularly prominent under the combined influence of sensory adaptation and cognitive and emotional exhaustion, highlighting the integrated psychological pathways through which mainstream fatigue drives brand switching.

Antecedents of the Mainstream Fatigue Effect: Satiation

Wenyuan Niu (2017) did not explore the antecedents of the mainstream fatigue effect in his work. However, based on the conceptual essence of this phenomenon, we propose that satiation serves as a key antecedent of mainstream fatigue. Satiation refers to the diminishing interest and declining appeal that consumers experience as a result of sustained exposure to the same brand. This concept has been extensively studied in the fields of marketing and psychology. Research indicates that even when consumers are not dissatisfied with their current brand, they may switch to alternative brands, sometimes even accepting lower-quality substitutes due to satiation (Park & Jang, 2014; Ratner et al., 1999). Satiation can be categorized into cognitive and emotional dimensions, which respectively reveal changes in consumers' psychological resources from the perspectives of information processing and emotional connection (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2021). Cognitive satiation occurs when consumers reach a saturation point in their understanding of a brand's functionality and information. At this stage, new information fails to capture attention, and the brand's appeal gradually diminishes (Zhang et al., 2025). Emotional satiation stems from a lack of novelty or stagnation in the emotional connection between consumers and the brand. Repeated emotional experiences over time may lead to emotional fatigue, causing consumers to gradually distance themselves from the brand (Cayla & Auriacombe, 2024). By linking satiation to mainstream fatigue, this study provides a deeper understanding of how prolonged exposure to a brand depletes consumers' psychological resources, ultimately driving brand-switching behavior.

This study posits that satiation paves the way for the psychological mechanisms of mainstream fatigue by weakening consumers' interest in and attraction to habitual brands. First, satiation triggers sensory adaptation, reducing consumers' perceptual sensitivity to the habitual brand and laying the foundation for subsequent psychological resource depletion. For example, prolonged exposure to a brand's advertisements may cause consumers to develop desensitization to its visual and content design (Karpenka et al., 2021). Second, satiation exacerbates cognitive and emotional exhaustion. When consumers find brand interactions repetitive and tedious, the continued depletion of cognitive and emotional resources further diminishes their interest in the brand (Appiah Kusi et al., 2022). Finally, satiation stimulates consumers' novelty-seeking behavior, motivating them to pursue new brands or experiences to fulfill psychological needs (Sevilla et al., 2019). Thus, satiation is not only the starting point of mainstream fatigue but also propels its development through multiple pathways.

The above analysis reveals that while both satiation and mainstream fatigue involve a decline in interest toward familiar stimuli, they differ significantly in conceptual essence and dynamic processes. Satiation primarily examines short-term changes in consumer choices, describing a static form of boredom in which repeated exposure leads to diminished pleasure (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024). In contrast, the mainstream fatigue effect focuses on the depletion and dynamic evolution of psychological resources in long-term interactions. It emphasizes how, building on satiation, consumers experience cognitive and emotional resource exhaustion, which in turn drives novelty-seeking behavior (Niu, 2017). This distinction highlights



that while satiation serves as an important antecedent of mainstream fatigue, it cannot fully explain the complex psychological processes involved. For instance, consumers might feel bored after repeated exposure to a brand's advertisements, which constitutes satiation. However, when this boredom evolves into emotional exhaustion and cognitive "dullness," ultimately prompting consumers to actively seek out new brands, it reflects the complete manifestation of mainstream fatigue.

Behavioral Consequences and Moderating Factors of Mainstream Fatigue: Brand Switching and Brand Inertia

The mainstream fatigue effect diminishes consumers' interest in existing brands and may further drive brand switching behavior. Brand switching refers to the act of consumers reducing or ceasing their purchase of a specific brand's products in favor of choosing another brand (Roy et al., 2022). This phenomenon can be temporary or may result in a permanent shift in brand preference (Henkel & Toporowski, 2023). Existing research suggests that brand switching is not solely a result of external environmental changes or brand-related errors; intrinsic psychological mechanisms in consumers also play a critical role. For example, variety seeking is an important psychological driver of brand switching, as consumers often switch to new brands due to boredom with their current brand, even in the absence of dissatisfaction (O. Kwon et al., 2023).

While variety seeking explains some instances of brand switching, the mainstream fatigue effect reveals a more dynamic and complex process: consumers experience gradual psychological resource depletion during prolonged brand interactions, compelling them to reassess the appeal of their current brand and seek new goals. Variety seeking primarily focuses on consumers' pursuit of novel stimuli, emphasizing the attractiveness of external alternatives, which often represents a short-term behavioral choice (Menidjel et al., 2023). In contrast, mainstream fatigue encompasses not only the desire for novelty but also the cognitive and emotional resource depletion arising from long-term interactions with the same brand due to satiation. This depletion further reduces the brand's appeal, prompting consumers to search for new brands to meet their psychological needs. Therefore, mainstream fatigue integrates the core mechanism of variety seeking while extending its scope to address the dynamic processes linking consumers' internal resource depletion and behavioral changes. It reflects deeper cognitive and emotional transformations in consumers.

At the same time, we propose that the impact of mainstream fatigue on brand switching is influenced by moderating factors, with brand inertia serving as a key variable. Brand inertia refers to the behavioral pattern in which consumers consistently choose the same brand across multiple purchases, driven by habit, the desire to reduce cognitive load, or the need to avoid decision-making risks (Cui et al., 2021). This habitual behavior can mitigate the negative effects of mainstream fatigue to some extent. For instance, when consumers face information overload or uncertainty, they are more likely to rely on past experiences and opt for familiar brands to save time and effort (Shiu, 2021). However, brand inertia does not always equate to genuine brand loyalty; many inertia-driven choices may simply reflect an attempt to avoid switching costs or decision-making risks (Henderson et al., 2021).

In summary, while mainstream fatigue and variety seeking share commonalities in driving brand switching, they also exhibit significant differences. Mainstream fatigue not only encompasses consumers' desire for new experiences but also highlights the dynamic process of psychological resource depletion resulting from prolonged brand interactions. Its influence is significantly moderated by brand inertia. This perspective provides a novel theoretical contribution to the study of brand switching and enriches the understanding of the dynamic changes in consumer behavior.

Hypotheses and Research Design

Although previous studies primarily focus on the positive effects of brand familiarity, little attention has been given to its potential negative consequences, particularly how the mainstream fatigue effect influences brand switching. Based on a review of the literature, this study proposes that when consumers reach a state of satiation, brand appeal may weaken, potentially triggering feelings of fatigue or boredom, which in turn drive consumers to seek new brands to satisfy their desire for novelty (Finkel et al., 2015; Koll & Plank, 2022).

As discussed earlier, satiation can be divided into cognitive and emotional dimensions. This study posits that the relationship between cognitive satiation and mainstream fatigue is more direct, as cognitive satiation reflects consumers' fixed evaluations of a brand's functional attributes, leading to a decline in interest in the brand (Sheng et al., 2023). In contrast, emotional satiation is more reflective of consumers' emotional attachment, which may still encourage consumers to maintain their brand choices even when in a saturated state (Joshi & Garg, 2021). Thus, cognitive satiation is likely to have a more significant impact on brand switching. Additionally, this study proposes that the mainstream fatigue effect is not only a result of cognitive satiation but also a critical mechanism driving changes in consumer behavior. Cognitive satiation reduces the functional appeal of a brand, triggering the mainstream fatigue effect, which accelerates the decline in consumer interest and fosters brand-switching behavior. Based on the above analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: *Compared to emotional satiation, cognitive satiation has a significantly greater impact on brand switching.*

H2: *The mainstream fatigue effect significantly mediates the relationship between cognitive satiation and brand switching.*



At the same time, this study proposes that brand inertia, as a stable consumer behavioral tendency, can significantly moderate the impact of the mainstream fatigue effect on brand switching. Research indicates that brand inertia can substantially reduce the likelihood of consumers changing their choices due to the appeal of alternative brands (Seth et al., 2020). Consumers may suppress their brand-switching intentions through long-term habitual behavior, even rationalizing their existing choices to offset the fatigue caused by oversaturated stimuli (Goyal et al., 2022). Additionally, brand inertia strengthens consumers' inclination to maintain their current brand by heightening their anxiety about switching costs and risks (Sánchez García & Curras-Perez, 2019). These factors collectively alleviate, to some extent, the influence of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior. Based on the above analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *Brand inertia significantly moderates the impact of the mainstream fatigue effect on brand switching.*

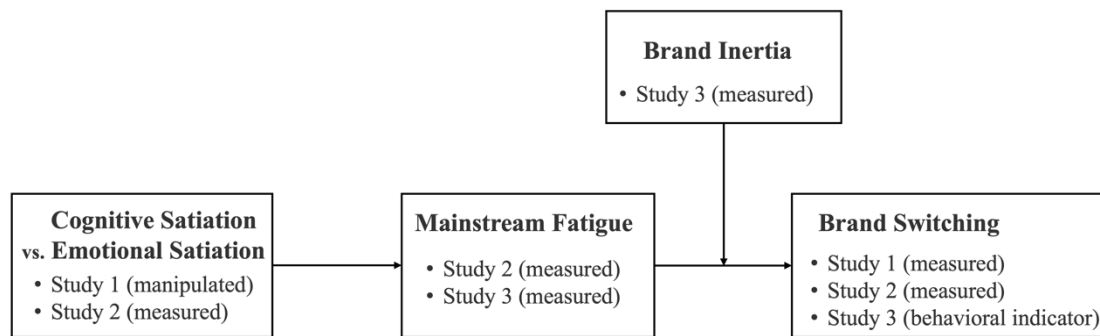


Figure 1: The overall framework of this study.

The research hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1. In this study, we selected consumer electronics products (headphones, personal computers, and smartphones) as the research context. These products were chosen because they exhibit high functionality, significant homogenized competition, and present challenges in maintaining brand loyalty (J. Kim et al., 2020). Therefore, they are well-suited as subjects for studying the phenomena of mainstream fatigue and brand switching. This research will be conducted in three parts: Study 1 will test Hypothesis H1, focusing on the differential impacts of cognitive and emotional satiation on brand switching. Study 2 will test Hypothesis H2, analyzing the distinct mediating roles of the mainstream fatigue effect in the relationships between the two types of satiation and brand switching. Study 3 will test Hypothesis H3, examining how brand inertia moderates the impact of the mainstream fatigue effect on brand switching. In the first two studies, brand switching will be assessed as an outcome variable using subjective evaluations from survey data. In the third study, behavioral indicators will be introduced to enhance the external validity of the research.

Study 1: The Impact of Cognitive and Emotional Satiation on Brand Switching

Study 1 aims to test Hypothesis H1 by exploring the independent and interactive effects of cognitive satiation and emotional satiation on brand switching. The study employs a 2×2 between-subjects design, manipulating the independent variables into four groups: high vs. low cognitive satiation and high vs. low emotional satiation. Participants' brand-switching intentions were measured, while controlling for potential confounding variables, including age, gender, disposable income, and product usage frequency.

Participants and Procedure

Participants in Study 1 came from diverse backgrounds, primarily recruited from the authors' executive education courses and various external lectures between 2023 and 2024. Participants received small cash rewards for participation. A total of 202 participants took part, including 113 males, with a mean age of 31.22 ± 7.59 years. The self-reported average monthly disposable income was 6698.02 ± 3415.34 RMB.

In Study 1, headphones were chosen as the study scenario. A reading priming paradigm was used to experimentally manipulate the independent variables (high vs. low cognitive satiation and high vs. low emotional satiation). Participants were first randomly assigned to different groups and asked to write down the brand of headphones they had used the longest. They were then instructed to read specific paragraphs describing either the cognitive utility or emotional utility of their habitual headphone brand. Subsequently, participants completed two following scales to assess the manipulations and dependent variable. Detailed materials are available in the supplementary materials.

Manipulation Check Measures

Cognitive and emotional satiation were assessed using scales developed based on Simonin & Ruth (1998) and Brakus et al. (2009) regarding brand familiarity and brand experience. The cognitive satiation scale consisted of four items (e.g., "I am



very familiar with the functions and features of this headphone brand, and there is little novelty left"), while the emotional satiation scale also comprised four items (e.g., "My emotional connection to this headphone brand has become neutral, and it is hard to feel special affection or interest"). Responses were recorded on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In Study 1, the Cronbach's α for these scales was 0.72 and 0.76, respectively.

Brand-Switching Intention Measures

Brand-switching intention was measured using a five-item scale developed based on Ranaweera & Neely (2003) and Wong et al. (2019) for studying brand-switching phenomena in consumer electronics. Sample items included: "I am willing to try a different headphone brand, even if my current brand is reasonably good." Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In Study 1, the Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.88.

3. RESULTS

To test the effectiveness of the manipulations, a 2×2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on cognitive and emotional satiation. The results showed that on the cognitive satiation scale, the manipulated cognitive satiation condition (high vs. low) had a significant main effect on cognitive satiation scores ($F(1,198) = 60.31, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.23$), and the manipulated emotional satiation condition (high vs. low) also had a significant main effect on cognitive satiation scores ($F(1,198) = 12.61, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.06$), but their interaction effect was not significant ($F(1,198) = 1.62, p = 0.205$). On the emotional satiation scale, the manipulated emotional satiation condition had a significant main effect on emotional satiation scores ($F(1,198) = 24.75, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.11$), and the manipulated cognitive satiation condition also had a significant main effect on emotional satiation scores ($F(1,198) = 33.24, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.14$), but their interaction effect was not significant ($F(1,198) = 2.47, p = 0.118$). Post hoc Tukey tests revealed that both the high cognitive satiation group and the high emotional satiation group scored significantly higher than their corresponding low-satiation groups, indicating that the manipulations of the independent variables were generally effective and that no significant interaction interference existed between the different conditions.

Next, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed to examine the relationships between variables. Manipulated cognitive satiation (high vs. low) and emotional satiation (high vs. low) were included as independent variables, with brand-switching intention as the dependent variable. Age, gender, and disposable income were included as control variables. The results revealed a significant main effect of cognitive satiation on brand-switching intention ($F(1,195) = 8.62, p = 0.004, \eta^2 = 0.04$), while the main effect of emotional satiation was not significant ($F(1,195) = 1.76, p = 0.187, \eta^2 = 0.009$). Additionally, the interaction between cognitive and emotional satiation was significant ($F(1,195) = 8.79, p = 0.003, \eta^2 = 0.04$), suggesting that the combination of the two types of satiation significantly influences brand-switching intention.

Post-hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD is summarized in Figure 2. The results indicated as follows. The high cognitive satiation group had significantly higher brand-switching intention than the low cognitive satiation group (difference = 0.37, 95% CI [0.12, 0.62], $p = 0.004$). The main effect of emotional satiation was not significant (difference = 0.17, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.42], $p = 0.191$). For the interaction effects, the high cognitive satiation and high emotional satiation group exhibited significantly higher brand-switching intention compared to the low cognitive satiation and high emotional satiation group (difference = 0.74, 95% CI [0.28, 1.20], $p < 0.001$), the high cognitive satiation and low emotional satiation group (difference = 0.57, 95% CI [0.09, 1.05], $p = 0.012$), and the low cognitive satiation and low emotional satiation group (difference = 0.54, 95% CI [0.08, 0.99], $p = 0.013$). These findings underscore the significant role of the interaction between cognitive and emotional satiation in influencing brand-switching intention.

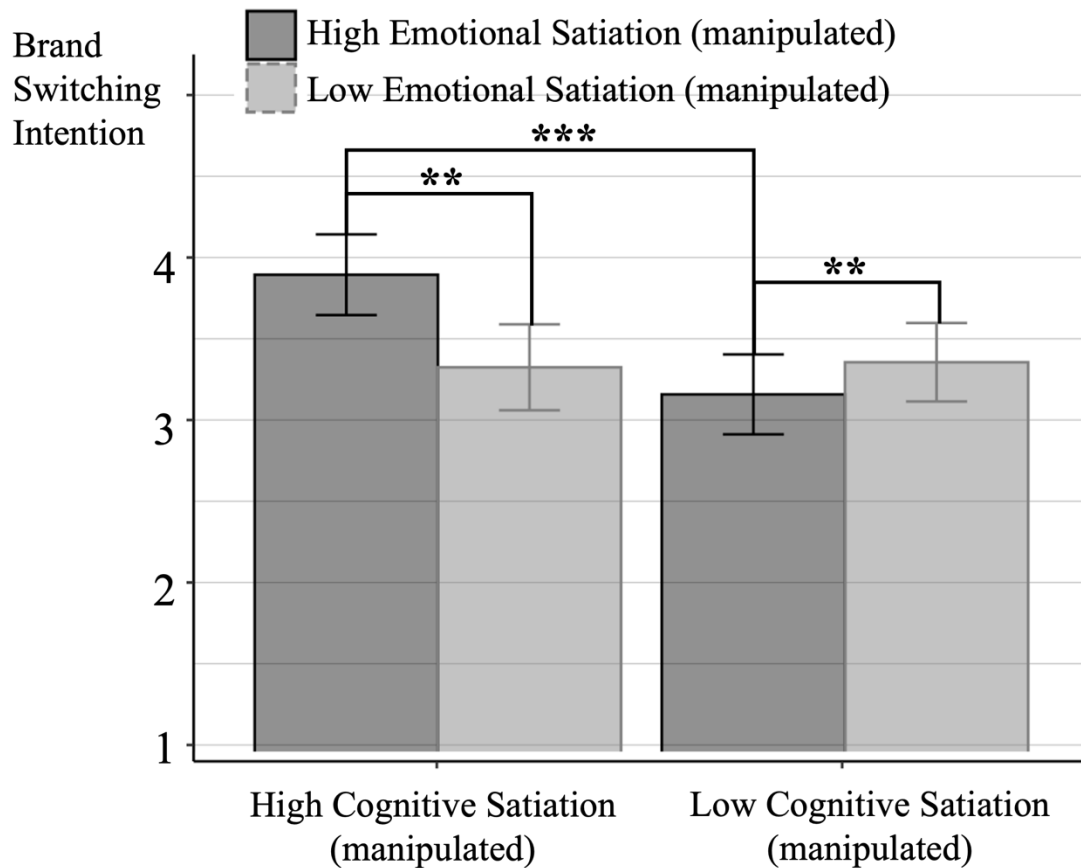


Figure 2: Post-hoc analysis results of ANCOVA in Study 1

(*** indicates $p < 0.001$; ** indicates $p < 0.01$)

4. DISCUSSION

The results of Study 1 validated Hypothesis H1; however, further analysis revealed that the effects of cognitive satiation and emotional satiation on brand-switching intentions are not entirely independent. The significant impact of high cognitive satiation on brand-switching intentions was primarily evident under the condition of high emotional satiation, whereas its influence was not significant under the condition of low emotional satiation. This finding suggests that emotional satiation may indirectly influence brand-switching intentions by amplifying the effect of cognitive satiation. Therefore, the interaction between cognitive and emotional satiation plays a critical role in shaping brand-switching intentions, rather than either variable acting as an independent driver. These results deepen the understanding of how satiation influences brand-switching behavior and highlight the complexity of the multidimensional satiation mechanism.

Study 2: The Mediating Role of Mainstream Fatigue in the Effect of Satiation on Brand Switching

Study 2 aims to test Hypothesis H2, specifically whether mainstream fatigue significantly mediates the effect of cognitive satiation on brand-switching intention. All variables in Study 2 were measured via survey to explore how cognitive satiation indirectly affects consumers' brand-switching intentions through mainstream fatigue. Relevant control variables, including demographic characteristics such as age, gender, disposable income, and product usage frequency, were included.

Participants and Procedure

Study 2 involved 523 participants recruited from the general sample pool on the online survey platform Credamo.com. Participants received small cash rewards for their participation. Among them, 255 were male, with a mean age of 30.5 ± 7.34 years. The self-reported average monthly disposable income was 6056.41 ± 3145.90 RMB.

Study 2 used personal computers as the research context. Participants were first asked to write down the brand of the computer they had used the longest. Subsequently, they completed three scales.



Cognitive and Emotional Satiation Measures

These scales were identical to the manipulation check scales used in Study 1. In Study 2, the Cronbach's α for cognitive satiation was 0.79, and for emotional satiation, it was 0.73.

Brand-Switching Intention Measures

This scale was also the same as the one used in Study 1, with a Cronbach's α of 0.89 in Study 2.

Mainstream Fatigue Measures

A 12-item scale was developed to measure mainstream fatigue, reflecting its four psychological dimensions as proposed in the literature review and conceptual framework: sensory adaptation, cognitive and emotional exhaustion, and novelty seeking.

For Sensory Adaptation measurement, three items were adapted from Winer et al.'s (2014) Interest Loss Scale (e.g., "Every time I use this brand, my experience feels the same, with no significant variations"). For Cognitive and Emotional Exhaustion measurement, six items were adapted from J. Sun et al.'s (2020) Tourism Fatigue State Scale (e.g., "Learning new information about this brand is no longer important to me" and "This brand no longer brings me emotional pleasure"). For Novelty Seeking measurement, three items were drawn from Arnett's (1994) Sensation Seeking Scale (e.g., "I believe other computer brands might offer different service experiences").

Participants rated all items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The Cronbach's α for the mainstream fatigue scale in Study 2 was 0.81. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) demonstrated that the 12-item, four-dimension structure of the scale had good fit indices ($\chi^2(48) = 162.86, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.944, TLI = 0.923, SRMR = 0.066, RMSEA = 0.068$). Detailed items for this scale are provided in the supplementary materials.

5. RESULTS

A path analysis was conducted with cognitive satiation, emotional satiation, and their interaction term (centered) as independent variables, mainstream fatigue as the mediating variable, and brand-switching intention as the dependent variable. The direct effects between variables are shown in Figure 3.

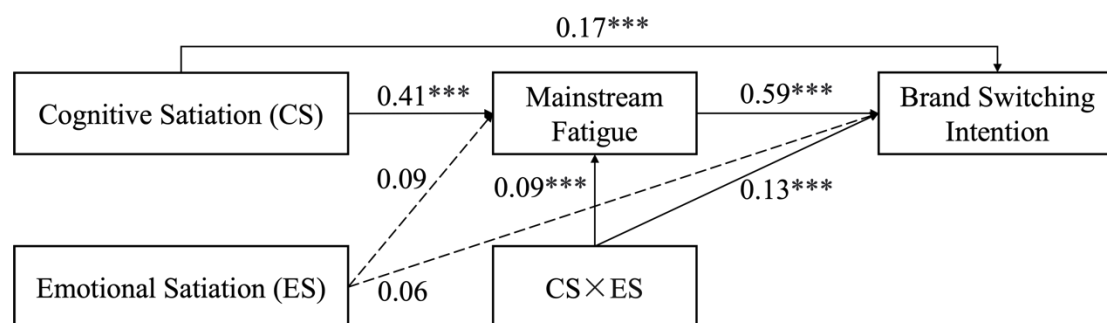


Figure 3: Path analysis results of Study 2. Numbers represent standardized path coefficients; dashed lines indicate non-significant paths.

The analysis revealed the following key findings. Cognitive satiation had a significant total effect on brand-switching intention ($\beta = 0.41, SE = 0.05, z = 8.95, p < 0.001$). The indirect effect through mainstream fatigue was also significant ($\beta = 0.24, SE = 0.03, z = 8.00, p < 0.001$), accounting for 58.54% of the total effect. This demonstrates that mainstream fatigue significantly mediates the effect of cognitive satiation on brand-switching intention.

Meanwhile, emotional satiation did not have a significant direct effect or indirect effect through mainstream fatigue on brand-switching intention ($\beta = 0.05, SE = 0.03, z = 1.70, p = 0.089$). However, its interaction with cognitive satiation had significant direct ($\beta = 0.18, SE = 0.04, z = 4.46, p < 0.001$) and indirect effects through mainstream fatigue ($\beta = 0.09, SE = 0.03, z = 3.69, p < 0.001$). These results suggest that the effect of emotional satiation on brand-switching intention operates primarily through its interaction with cognitive satiation, with mainstream fatigue playing a crucial mediating role in this process.

To further investigate the interaction effects on mainstream fatigue, a generalized linear model (GLM) was employed, incorporating age, gender, and monthly disposable income as control variables. Simple slope analyses revealed when cognitive satiation was low ($-1 SD, M = 3.48$), emotional satiation had no significant effect on mainstream fatigue ($\beta = -0.04, SE = 0.05, t = -0.72, p = 0.47$); however, when cognitive satiation was high ($+1 SD, M = 4.48$), emotional satiation had a significant positive effect on mainstream fatigue ($\beta = 0.19, SE = 0.06, t = 3.22, p < 0.001$). These results further support the



main effect of cognitive satiation and its moderating role in the relationship between emotional satiation and mainstream fatigue. See Figure 4.

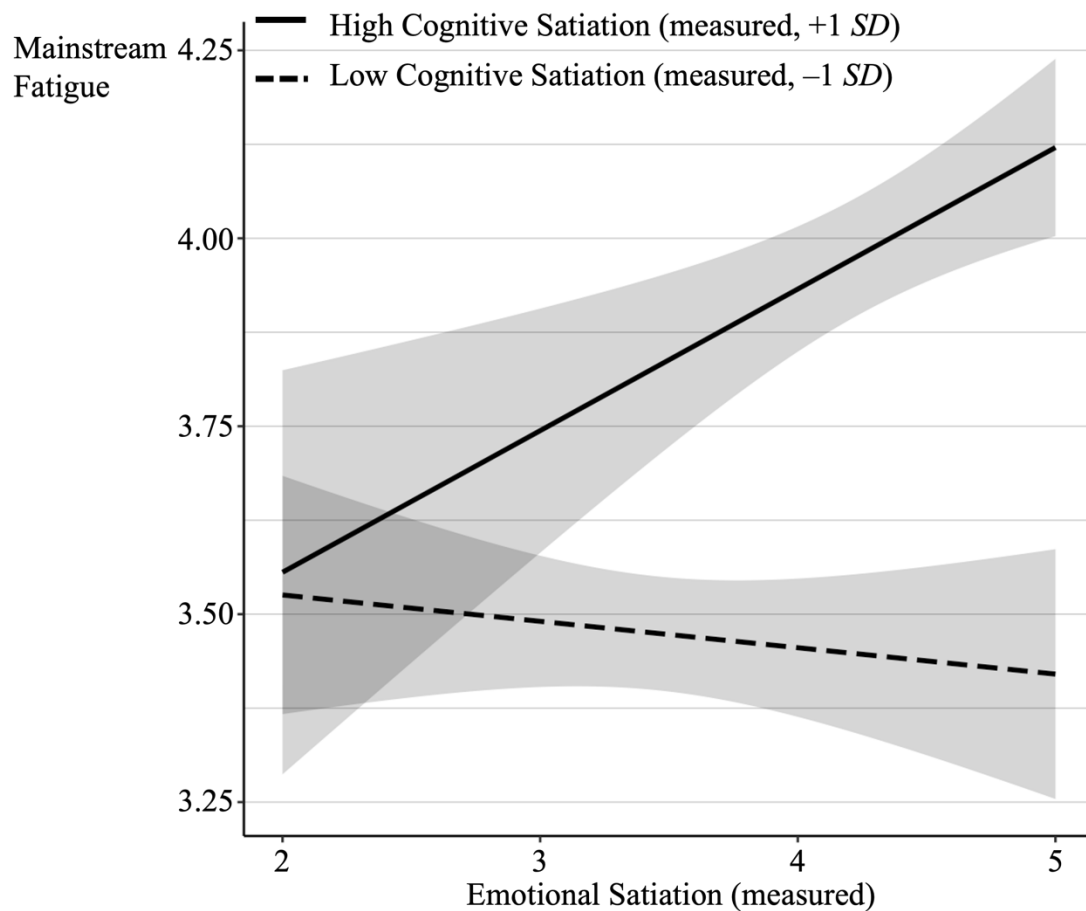


Figure 4: Interaction effect of cognitive and emotional satiation on mainstream fatigue. Shaded areas represent the 95% confidence interval.

6. DISCUSSION

Study 2 developed a mainstream fatigue measurement scale with strong internal consistency and a valid four-dimensional structure, providing a reliable tool for future research. The findings validated Hypothesis H2, confirming that mainstream fatigue significantly mediates the effect of cognitive satiation on brand-switching intention, thereby shedding light on the mechanism underlying this relationship. Additionally, similar to Study 1, emotional satiation did not directly impact brand-switching intention. Instead, its influence on mainstream fatigue was realized through its interaction with cognitive satiation. This suggests that emotional satiation plays a supportive role in the brand-switching process, emphasizing the dynamic and synergistic interplay between the two dimensions of satiation.

Study 3: The Moderating Role of Brand Inertia in Mitigating the Effects of Mainstream Fatigue on Brand Switching

Study 3 aims to test Hypothesis H3, which posits that brand inertia significantly moderates the effect of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior. The first two studies explored the impact of cognitive and emotional satiation on brand-switching intention and the mediating role of mainstream fatigue. Building on these findings, Study 3 focuses on how brand inertia weakens or amplifies the influence of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior. Unlike the first two studies, Study 3 employs a behavioral indicator to measure brand switching, capturing consumers' actual behavioral data. Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, disposable income, and product usage frequency were again controlled to ensure an accurate assessment of the moderating role of brand inertia.

Participants and Procedure

Similar to Study 2, participants in Study 3 were recruited from the general sample pool on the online survey platform Credamo.com and received small cash rewards for participation. The study included 306 participants, of whom 147 were



male. The mean age was 30.08 ± 7.53 years, and the self-reported average monthly disposable income was 5759.80 ± 2934.31 RMB.

In Study 3, smartphones were used as the study scenario. Similar to Studies 1 and 2, participants were first asked to write down the brand of the smartphone they had used the longest. They then completed two following scales.

Mainstream Fatigue Measures

The 12-item scale used in Study 2 was employed again in Study 3, with a Cronbach's α of 0.84. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated good fit indices for the four-dimensional structure ($\chi^2(48) = 135.20, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.928, TLI = 0.901, SRMR = 0.086, RMSEA = 0.077$).

Brand Inertia Measures

This scale was adapted from service inertia measures developed by Hock et al. (2010) and Yanamandram & White (2006). Five items were included, such as "I tend to stick with familiar brands, even if other brands might be more suitable." Participants rated their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.77. Detailed items are provided in the supplementary materials.

Brand Switching Behavioral Indicator

Finally, participants were asked a binary question: "Is the smartphone brand you are currently using the same as the brand of your previous smartphone?" The response options were limited to "Yes" or "No," serving as the behavioral indicator of brand switching.

7. RESULTS

Two logistic regression models were constructed with brand-switching behavior (0 = no switching, 1 = switching) as the dependent variable. Model 1 included mainstream fatigue and brand inertia as independent variables, with age, gender, and monthly disposable income as control variables. Model 2 added the interaction term between mainstream fatigue and brand inertia (centered) to Model 1. A comparison of model fit indicated that Model 2 had a lower AIC (294.56) than Model 1 (297.83), suggesting improved model fit with the inclusion of the interaction term.

The results of the two models are presented in Table 1. In both models, mainstream fatigue had a significant positive main effect on brand-switching behavior, while brand inertia had a significant negative main effect. In Model 2, the interaction term between mainstream fatigue and brand inertia had a significant negative effect on brand-switching behavior. This indicates that brand inertia significantly moderates the effect of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior: as brand inertia increases, the positive effect of mainstream fatigue on brand switching weakens.

Table 1: Logistic regression results for the effects of mainstream fatigue and brand inertia on brand switching

Variable	Model 1 (AIC = 297.83)				Model 2 (AIC = 294.56)			
	β	SE	z	p	β	SE	z	p
Constant	-0.54	0.21	-2.58	0.01	-0.52	0.21	-2.45	0.01
Mainstream Fatigue	0.58	0.17	3.41	< 0.001	0.57	0.18	3.23	< 0.001
Brand Inertia	-1.57	0.19	-8.07	< 0.001	-1.58	0.20	-7.90	< 0.001
Mainstream Fatigue \times Brand Inertia	/	/	/	/	-0.45	0.20	-2.26	0.02
Age	-0.20	0.16	-1.25	0.21	-0.21	0.17	-1.25	0.21
Gender	-0.03	0.31	-0.1	0.92	-0.01	0.31	-0.04	0.97
Disposable Income	-0.12	0.16	-0.71	0.48	-0.12	0.17	-0.70	0.49

Simple slope analysis revealed that when brand inertia was low ($-1 SD, M = 2.25$), the positive effect of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior was significantly stronger ($\beta = 1.86, SE = 0.51, z = 3.65, p < 0.001$). However, when brand inertia was high ($+1 SD, M = 3.98$), the effect of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior was not significant ($\beta = 0.22, SE = 0.46, z = 0.49, p = 0.63$). These findings confirm the moderating role of brand inertia in the relationship between



mainstream fatigue and brand-switching behavior: as brand inertia increases, the positive effect of mainstream fatigue on brand switching gradually diminishes and eventually becomes insignificant. See Figure 5.

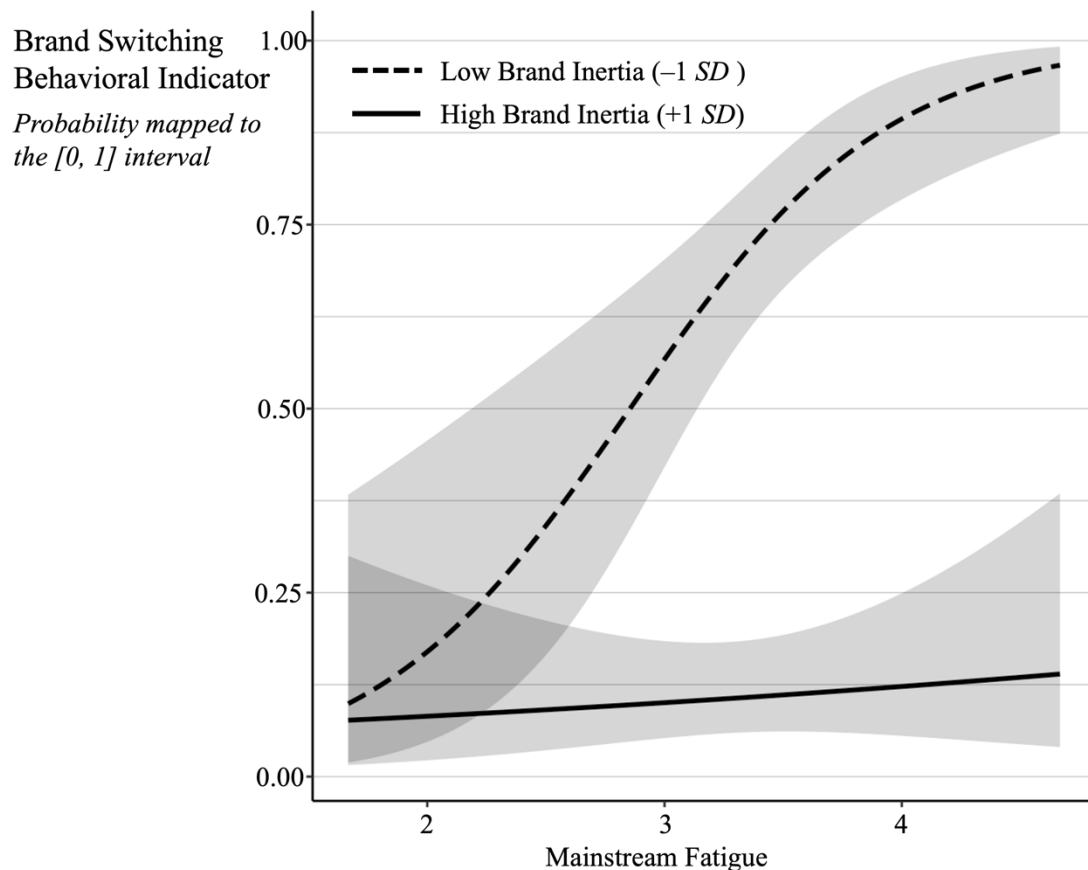


Figure 5: Interaction effect of mainstream fatigue and brand inertia on brand-switching behavior. Shaded areas indicate the 95% confidence interval.

8. DISCUSSION

The results of Study 3 support Hypothesis H3, demonstrating that brand inertia significantly moderates the effect of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior. Specifically, as brand inertia increases, the positive effect of mainstream fatigue on brand switching gradually weakens and eventually becomes insignificant. This indicates that brand inertia acts as a psychological barrier, effectively mitigating the negative impact of mainstream fatigue on brand loyalty.

Research Findings and Implications

Research Findings

Through three independent yet interrelated experiments, this study systematically validated the role of the mainstream fatigue effect in brand switching. Study 1 confirmed Hypothesis H1, showing that cognitive satiation significantly increased consumers' brand-switching intentions, while the main effect of emotional satiation was not significant. However, the interaction between emotional and cognitive satiation had a significant impact on brand-switching intentions. Study 2 validated Hypothesis H2, demonstrating that the effect of cognitive satiation on brand-switching intentions was mediated by the mainstream fatigue effect. Emotional satiation had no direct effect on mainstream fatigue but indirectly influenced mainstream fatigue and brand-switching intentions through its interaction with cognitive satiation. Study 3 confirmed Hypothesis H3, showing that brand inertia significantly moderated the impact of mainstream fatigue on brand switching: as brand inertia increased, the positive effect of mainstream fatigue on brand switching weakened. These findings not only validate the importance of mainstream fatigue as a novel mechanism in brand switching but also reveal the dynamic relationships among satiation, mainstream fatigue, and brand inertia. This provides valuable insights for brand management strategies.

Theoretical Contributions



This study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, it extends the theoretical boundaries of satiation by constructing a dual-dimensional mechanism that explains its impact on brand switching. Unlike previous studies that predominantly emphasize the positive effects of familiarity, such as enhancing brand trust and preference (Junior Ladeira et al., 2022; Y. Sun & Khan, 2023), this study differentiates between cognitive satiation and emotional satiation to reveal how these dimensions independently and synergistically influence brand-switching behavior. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that cognitive satiation exerts a significantly stronger effect on brand switching than emotional satiation. This is likely because cognitive satiation more directly influences consumers' evaluations of a brand's functional attributes, leading to reduced attention to the brand and triggering the mainstream fatigue effect. Additionally, the study finds that the impact of emotional satiation on brand switching depends heavily on its interaction with cognitive satiation. This discovery offers new evidence for the neural mechanisms underlying the interplay between cognitive and emotional systems: cognitive activities (e.g., attention allocation and information processing) directly influence emotional experiences (Li et al., 2021). In this study, when consumers experience both cognitive and emotional satiation, cognitive overload may weaken the buffering role of emotional attachment, amplifying the negative effects of mainstream fatigue. These findings deepen the understanding of the dual pathways of cognition and emotion in brand familiarity and provide a novel perspective for the future development of familiarity theories.

Second, this study introduces, constructs, and extends the concept of mainstream fatigue, proposing a new mechanism linking satiation to brand switching. Mainstream fatigue is a key theoretical concept introduced in this study to explain the negative psychological states and behavioral outcomes that consumers experience as a result of satiation. Existing research on user fatigue largely focuses on exogenous factors, such as the effects of external environments, brand information overload, or social network interactions (Appiah et al., 2019; Koll & Plank, 2022; Pang & Ruan, 2023). However, this study, grounded in consumers' intrinsic psychological patterns, proposes mainstream fatigue as an endogenous psychological mechanism to explain how satiation drives brand-switching intentions through sensory adaptation, cognitive and emotional exhaustion, and novelty seeking. Specifically, this study interprets the mainstream fatigue effect as a process in which consumers develop sensory adaptation and diminished attention during prolonged exposure to the same brand, resulting in fatigue and boredom with brand information. At the same time, the novelty of new brand information, which provides higher levels of neural activation, more readily captures consumers' attention and interest. This endogenous perspective not only deepens the understanding of the mainstream fatigue effect but also provides theoretical support for the mechanism by which satiation influences brand switching. Additionally, this study adapted existing measures of related concepts to develop a mainstream fatigue measurement scale with high reliability and validity, providing a reliable tool for future research. The scale, which encompasses four dimensions—sensory adaptation, cognitive exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, and novelty seeking—comprehensively captures the sense of fatigue consumers experience during long-term brand use. The theoretical framework developed here, applied in the context of consumer electronics, offers a novel perspective for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying brand choices and lays a theoretical foundation for cross-domain research in consumer behavior.

Third, this study enriches the dynamic understanding of the relationship between mainstream fatigue and brand switching by revealing the critical moderating role of brand inertia. By introducing brand inertia as a variable, this study uncovers the complex dynamic relationship between consumers' psychological states and behavioral choices. Brand inertia, defined as consumers' tendency to rely on familiar brands, has long been viewed as a factor that promotes brand loyalty. However, its specific moderating role in the context of mainstream fatigue has been rarely explored. This study finds that brand inertia significantly weakens the positive effect of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior. Consumers with high brand inertia are more constrained by emotional attachment and switching costs, making them more likely to maintain their current brand even under the negative influence of mainstream fatigue. Conversely, consumers with low brand inertia are more sensitive to the adverse effects of mainstream fatigue, exhibiting a greater tendency to switch brands. This moderating effect reveals that brand inertia is not merely a static consumer trait but also a dynamic mechanism that can significantly alter consumers' responses to mainstream fatigue in different contexts. Furthermore, the study clarifies the dual role of brand inertia in the psychological and behavioral mechanisms of consumers. It acts as a buffer by mitigating the influence of mainstream fatigue on brand-switching behavior, while simultaneously interacting with the mainstream fatigue effect as a manifestation of long-term consumer habits and emotional attachment. These findings shed light on the more intricate dynamics of brand loyalty and expand the application scenarios of brand inertia theories, offering a fresh perspective on their practical relevance.

Practical Implications

First, addressing the challenges of satiation from the perspective of consumer psychological mechanisms. This study reveals the deep-seated mechanisms through which satiation drives consumer brand-switching behavior, offering new insights for companies to develop differentiated brand management strategies. To tackle cognitive satiation, companies need to overcome consumers' cognitive exhaustion with a brand's functional attributes by employing strategies such as "enhancing functional value" and "increasing informational gain" to re-engage consumers. For example, beyond traditional approaches like technological innovation and product updates, companies can adopt deep contextual marketing, strengthen consumer



education, or design more immersive brand experiences to enrich consumers' cognitive perceptions of the brand. For consumers with high emotional satiation, companies should focus on reshaping emotional connections. Strategies like narrative-driven brand communication, cultural collaborations, or community engagement can help create long-term emotional appeal for the brand. Compared to simple innovation, these psychologically driven strategies can more precisely address the specific needs and pain points of consumers in different states of satiation, offering targeted solutions that enhance brand loyalty and engagement.

Second, optimizing the user journey with a focus on mainstream fatigue to establish dynamic brand relationship management. The mainstream fatigue effect reflects the dynamic depletion of consumers' psychological resources, indicating the need for businesses to shift from static user management to dynamic brand relationship management. Companies can mitigate psychological fatigue caused by repetitive interactions by optimizing touchpoints across the user journey. For example, dynamically adjusting advertising frequency, fine-tuning recommendation algorithms to reduce information overload, and regularly introducing diverse brand interaction activities that offer varied experiences and aesthetics can effectively alleviate mainstream fatigue. Furthermore, through user lifecycle management, businesses can identify and proactively intervene with consumer groups at high risk of mainstream fatigue—such as long-term users or those with high product usage frequency. Providing personalized incentives or renewal plans tailored to these groups can sustain consumers' interest in the brand, fostering deeper and more dynamic brand relationships.

Third, leveraging brand inertia and emotional connection to balance innovation and loyalty. While innovation is crucial for mitigating mainstream fatigue, excessive innovation may undermine brand stability and coherence. Therefore, businesses should fully utilize brand inertia as a moderating factor to reduce the negative impact of mainstream fatigue on brand switching. Specifically, companies can strengthen their brand ecosystem (e.g., offering cross-category bundled services), implement high-engagement membership programs (e.g., VIP experiences, personalized benefits), and design emotionally rich user participation mechanisms (e.g., user-generated content campaigns or loyal customer recognitions) to increase the psychological and economic costs of switching brands. These strategies should be integrated with innovation practices, ensuring that while consumers maintain their reliance on the brand, they also perceive the continuous creation of new value. This approach enables businesses to achieve the dual objectives of fostering brand loyalty and attracting new users.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

First, the limitations of the research context. This study focused on consumer electronics (headphones, personal computers, and smartphones), which are characterized by high functionality and homogeneity, making them suitable for exploring the relationship between satiation and brand switching. However, the generalizability of the findings to other industries or product categories may be limited. For instance, in industries with high emotional dependence, such as luxury goods or fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs), the manifestations of satiation and mainstream fatigue may differ. Future research could extend the investigation to other sectors, such as luxury goods, service industries, or cultural products, to examine the universality and cross-industry variations of the mainstream fatigue effect.

Second, the refinement and expansion of mainstream fatigue measurement. While this study developed a reliable and valid mainstream fatigue scale and confirmed its four-dimensional structure, its applicability and flexibility require further exploration. For example, cultural or societal contexts may influence the expression of mainstream fatigue, and the relative importance of its dimensions might shift in non-consumer electronics domains. Future research could refine and expand the mainstream fatigue scale, examining the relative contributions of its dimensions in different contexts. Additionally, the scale's capacity for dynamic measurement should be explored further to capture the temporal evolution of mainstream fatigue.

Third, the exploration of the dynamic nature of brand inertia. This study treated brand inertia as a relatively static consumer trait and demonstrated its moderating effect on the relationship between mainstream fatigue and brand switching. However, the dynamic changes in brand inertia across the consumer lifecycle may significantly influence brand-switching behavior. For example, different market stages, consumer brand experiences, and external competitive environments may alter the strength of brand inertia. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to investigate the dynamic evolution of brand inertia and its buffering effect on mainstream fatigue, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its role in consumer decision-making. These investigations could offer more granular strategic guidance for brand management.

Notes

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request



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