

# THE EVOLUTION OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD: FROM FUTURE SHOCK TO CUSTOMER WELL-BEING

**A call for brand accountability  
in the mental health crisis**

How the content economy must acknowledge  
its role in human psychological well-being

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# ABSTRACT

**In 1970, Alvin Toffler presciently warned of “future shock” - a condition arising when accelerated technological change overwhelms human adaptive capacity. More than five decades later, his predictions have manifested through ubiquitous social media and the emergence of what can only be described as a mental health pandemic. This report examines the evolution from Toffler’s theoretical framework to contemporary realities, with particular focus on the role brands and corporations play in perpetuating information overload through engagement-driven marketing practices.**

Drawing from peer-reviewed research spanning 2020-2025, we document how the corporate pursuit of customer attention - the fundamental currency of the digital economy - directly contributes to rising rates of anxiety, depression, attention disorders, and social fragmentation. While digital connectivity offers unprecedented opportunities, evidence reveals that brand-driven content strategies designed to maximise engagement are causing measurable harm to human well-being.

This report builds the case for a fundamental shift in how brands approach their relationship with human attention and psychology. Through comprehensive analysis of current research and industry practices, we argue that the marketing industry must fundamentally reframe its relationship with human attention, moving from exploitation to protection, from engagement maximisation to well-being optimisation.

The time has come for brands to accept their role in the mental health crisis and embrace new models of ethical marketing that prioritise human flourishing over algorithmic engagement. The evidence presented here suggests that this is not merely a moral imperative but a business necessity for long-term sustainability.

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# FOREWORD

## The Industry's Moment of Truth

**As professionals working in the creative and branding industry, we have long been fascinated by how we shape perceptions, influence behaviour, and - quite literally - change minds. But in recent years, a growing body of research has forced us to confront an uncomfortable truth: the emotional and cognitive weight of modern commercial communication is contributing to a crisis in human psychological well-being.**

We live in a time where content is infinite, but attention is finite - a truth we in the creative industries understand deeply, and, if we're honest, often exploit. We optimise for clicks, shares, likes, and engagement - encouraged by algorithms, KPIs, and client expectations. But we rarely stop to ask: at what cost?

The research presented in this report makes one thing devastatingly clear: brands are not innocent bystanders in the mental health crisis sweeping across developed nations. We are active participants. Our content strategies, our engagement tactics, our algorithmic amplification - these are not neutral forces. They are designed interventions in human psychology, and they are causing measurable harm.

The statistics are staggering. One in four people suffers from some form of mental health problem annually. Yet our industry continues to operate as if human attention is an unlimited resource to be mined rather than a precious cognitive capacity to be protected.

We have created an economy based on the exploitation of human psychology. We understand dopamine feedback loops. We know how to trigger FOMO. We've mastered the art of creating content that hijacks attention and keeps people scrolling, clicking, and consuming. And we've done it all in service of metrics that have little to do with human well-being.

This is not sustainable. This is not ethical. And increasingly, this is not even good business.

The research that follows builds a compelling case for why our industry must develop a new approach - one that acknowledges our role in people's psychological well-being and takes responsibility for the cognitive and emotional impact of our work.

This is not about abandoning effectiveness. It's about redefining it. True engagement doesn't rob people of their time, energy or peace of mind. It respects their humanity. It earns attention rather than hijacking it. It creates value rather than extracting it.

The evidence in this report should serve as a wake-up call for our entire industry. We cannot continue to plead ignorance about the mental health impacts of our work. The research is clear, the harm is documented, and the time for change is now.

**"The research that follows builds a compelling case for why our industry must develop a new approach."**

# 1

## TOFFLER'S PROPHECTIC FRAMEWORK

### The Original Warning

In 1970, futurist Alvin Toffler issued a prophetic warning in his ground-breaking work *Future Shock*. He argued that the "accelerated rate of technological and social change" was overwhelming people, creating a condition he termed "future shock" - characterised by "the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future" (Toffler, 1970).

Toffler's central thesis was revolutionary for its time: he proposed that rapid surges in information and choice were fundamentally straining human cognitive capacity. He warned that "glutting a person with more information than he can process" could lead to mental disturbance, citing early studies linking information overload to cognitive breakdowns resembling mental illness.

### His key insights included:

**Cognitive Overload:** The human brain has limited capacity for processing information, and exceeding this capacity leads to stress and dysfunction.

**Acceleration Syndrome:** The pace of change itself becomes a **Choice Overload:** Too many options can paralyse decision-making rather than enhance it, leading to anxiety and regret.

**Social Fragmentation:** Rapid information flows can undermine social cohesion and shared reality, isolating individuals in information bubbles.

Toffler warned that when information input rates exceed processing capacity, humans exhibit breakdown patterns similar to those seen in mental illness. He cited research by James G. Miller showing that subjects overwhelmed with rapid information input began displaying cognitive errors "peculiarly characteristic of schizophrenics" (Miller, 1960, as cited in Toffler, 1970).

Mental health disorders now constitute the fifth greatest contributor to the global burden of disease, with an economic cost estimated at US \$2.5 trillion in 2010, expected to double by 2030

(World Health Organization, 2022)

### The Manifestation of Prophecy

More than half a century later, Toffler's predictions have not merely come to pass - they have manifested as what can only be described as a mental health pandemic. Mental health disorders (including substance abuse) now constitute the fifth greatest contributor to the global burden of disease, with an economic cost estimated at US \$2.5 trillion in 2010, expected to double by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2022).

But there's a critical element to this crisis that Toffler couldn't have fully anticipated: the role of commercial interests in deliberately engineering and amplifying information overload for profit.

### The Commercial Amplification

What we face today is not merely the accidental by-product of technological progress, but the intended outcome of business models built on capturing and monetising human attention. The volume of brand-generated content now dwarfs anything Toffler could have imagined:

**Global digital advertising spending reached \$876 billion in 2024** (Statista, 2024)

**The average person encounters between 4,000-10,000 brand messages daily, up from fewer than 500 in the 1970s** (Simpson, 2017)

**Anxiety disorders affected 301 million people globally in 2019, with a 25.6% increase during the pandemic** (World Health Organization, 2022)

This explosion in commercial messaging coincides directly with rising rates of mental health disorders, particularly anxiety and depression - precisely the conditions Toffler predicted would result from information overload.

# 2 THE CORPORATE ATTENTION ECONOMY

## The Attention Merchants

**Technology critic Tim Wu coined the term "attention merchants" to describe businesses whose product is human consciousness itself.**

These companies have perfected what Wu calls "the art of harvesting human attention and reselling it to advertisers" (Wu, 2016).

The business model is elegantly simple but psychologically devastating:

1. Create platforms or content that capture attention
2. Use psychological manipulation to maximise time-on-platform
3. Sell access to captured attention to advertisers
4. Optimise for engagement rather than well-being

This model has created perverse incentives where human psychological distress becomes profitable. The more anxious, lonely, or dissatisfied people become, the more they engage with content, and the more valuable they become to advertisers.

## The Engagement Trap

The fundamental problem lies in how success is measured in the attention economy. Engagement metrics - likes, shares, comments, time spent, pages viewed - have become proxies for business value. But these metrics optimise for psychological manipulation rather than human well-being.

As noted by researchers in the AMS Review: "As social media increasingly permeates everyday life, ethical concerns about its use are coming into sharper focus. At the same time, the ethical issues involved in social media marketing have received somewhat limited attention from marketing research and practice" (Dwivedi et al., 2024).

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## Sophisticated Manipulation Techniques

Modern brands employ teams of neuroscientists, behavioural economists, and data scientists to create content that maximises psychological captivation:

### Intermittent Reinforcement

Like gambling mechanics, social media platforms provide unpredictable rewards to maintain engagement habits.

### Social Proof Manipulation

Brands exploit our fundamental need for social belonging through likes, shares, and social signals.

### Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

Marketing campaigns deliberately create artificial scarcity and urgency to trigger anxiety responses.

### Para-social Relationships

Influencer marketing exploits one-sided emotional connections that feel real but serve commercial purposes.

### Cognitive Bias Exploitation

Brands systematically target confirmation bias, anchoring bias, and availability heuristic to influence decision-making.

### Dopamine Manipulation

Content is designed to trigger dopamine releases through unpredictable rewards, creating addiction-like patterns of engagement.

## The Scale of Commercial Information Production

The evidence reveals that corporate marketing strategies are not neutral participants in the information economy - they are primary drivers of the mental health crisis facing developed nations.

**According to consumer research, 82% of consumers prefer marketing campaigns that use their data in a responsible way** (DigitallyAlex, 2024)

...yet the majority of brand communications are designed to exploit psychological vulnerabilities rather than respect human autonomy.

# 3 THE MENTAL HEALTH PANDEMIC

## The Scale of the Crisis

The evidence for a mental health pandemic is overwhelming and coincides directly with the rise of social media and engagement-driven marketing:

### Anxiety Disorders

- 301 million people globally suffered from anxiety disorders in 2019 (World Health Organization, 2022)
- Anxiety rates among teenagers increased by 52% between 2005 and 2017 (Twenge, 2017)
- Social media use correlates strongly with anxiety levels across all age groups (Hunt et al., 2018)

### Depression

- Teen depression rates have risen dramatically since 2010, coinciding with smart phone adoption (Twenge, 2017)
- Young adults show the highest rates of major depressive episodes in recorded history (SAMHSA, 2023)
- According to the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Report, anxiety and depression rates increased by 25% in the first year of the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2022)

### Attention Disorders

- ADHD diagnoses have increased by 42% in the past decade (Xu et al., 2018)
- Average attention spans have decreased from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2023 (Microsoft Canada, 2023)
- Constant task-switching behaviour mirrors symptoms of attention deficit disorders (Ophir et al., 2009)

### Overall Mental Health Impact

- One in eight people globally lived with a mental disorder in 2019 (World Health Organization, 2022)
- 73% of Americans in 2023 felt "overwhelmed by the number of crises" in media (American Psychological Association, 2024)

Young adults show the highest rates of major depressive episodes in recorded history (SAMHSA, 2023)

## The Direct Brand Connection

Research increasingly links these mental health trends to engagement-driven content consumption:

### Information Overload Studies

- Heavy social media users (3+ hours daily) show significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression (Primack et al., 2017)
- Passive content consumption (scrolling without engaging) is particularly harmful to mental health (Verduyn et al., 2015)
- 35% of consumers felt frustration when they received marketing campaigns based on information they didn't directly share with the brand (DigitallyAlex, 2024)

### Doom-scrolling and News Anxiety

- Constant exposure to negative news creates chronic stress responses that mirror clinical anxiety (Johnston & Davey, 1997)
- Brand-amplified crisis content contributes to learned helplessness and depression
- Commercial content designed to capture attention often exploits negative emotional states

### Social Comparison and FOMO

- Exposure to curated brand content increases feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth (Vogel et al., 2014)
- Influencer marketing systematically exploits natural social comparison tendencies (Meier & Gray, 2014)
- Brand-driven FOMO campaigns directly trigger anxiety responses and compulsive behaviour (Przybylski et al., 2013)

# 4

## THE CORPORATE DUTY OF CARE IMPERATIVE

### Legal and Ethical Precedents

The concept of corporate duty of care is well-established in industries that affect human health and well-being. The marketing industry's impact on psychological health demands similar accountability frameworks.

### The Case for Brand Accountability

Brands have a direct and measurable impact on people's psychological lives, bombarding consumers with thousands of marketing messages every day. This impact comes with moral, business, and societal responsibilities.

#### Moral Arguments for Responsibility

- Brands deliberately exploit psychological vulnerabilities for commercial gain
- Marketing strategies are scientifically designed to influence behaviour and emotions
- Corporate profits increasingly depend on human psychological manipulation
- With unprecedented power over human attention comes responsibility for consequences

#### Business Arguments for Accountability

- 89% of consumers in the UK & USA say they would be more likely to buy from businesses that make a commitment to protecting their personal data online (Deloitte, 2023)
- Trust and brand loyalty correlate strongly with ethical practices and genuine care (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2024)
- Regulatory backlash threatens business models built on psychological exploitation
- Long-term sustainability requires healthy, rather than manipulated, customer relationships

#### Societal Arguments for Change

- Mental health costs are being externalised to public health systems and families
- Social fragmentation undermines democratic institutions and community cohesion
- Economic inequality is exacerbated by consumption pressures and social comparison
- Environmental costs of overconsumption driven by marketing are unsustainable

**Trust and brand loyalty correlate strongly with ethical practices and genuine care**

(Edelman Trust Barometer, 2024)

### The Emerging Regulatory Landscape

Governments worldwide are beginning to recognise the need for intervention in the attention economy:

#### European Union Leadership

- GDPR includes specific provisions for psychological profiling restrictions
- Digital Services Act requires risk assessment for systemic harms to society
- Proposed regulations on dark patterns and manipulative design practices

#### United States Development

- State-level privacy laws increasingly include marketing practice restrictions
- FTC guidance on deceptive practices now includes psychological manipulation
- Congressional hearings on social media platform responsibilities and accountability

#### United Kingdom Innovation

- Age-appropriate design codes restrict targeting of minors with commercial content
- Online safety bills include explicit mental health impact provisions
- Advertising standards authority expanding digital oversight and enforcement

# 5

## RESEARCH- BASED EVIDENCE FOR INDUSTRY IMPACT

### Quantifying the Mental Health Correlation

Recent research provides compelling evidence linking brand-driven content consumption to measurable mental health deterioration:

#### Information Overload Studies:

- **Heavy social media users show 2.7 times higher rates of depression** (Lin et al., 2016)
- **Each additional hour of social media use correlates with a 9% increase in depression risk** (Primack et al., 2017)
- **Constant exposure to commercial messaging creates cognitive exhaustion that mirrors clinical attention disorders**

#### Social Comparison Research:

- Exposure to idealised brand content increases body dissatisfaction by 26% (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013)
- Influencer marketing exposure correlates with increased materialism and decreased well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014)
- Brand-driven lifestyle content correlates with increased rates of depression in young adults

#### Attention and Cognitive Function Studies:

- Commercial content designed for engagement reduces sustained attention capacity by up to 23% (Mark et al., 2016)
- Multi-platform brand messaging creates cognitive switching costs that impair decision-making
- Advertising-heavy environments produce measurable cortisol increases indicating stress responses (Moray et al., 2022)

**Advertising-heavy environments produce measurable cortisol increases indicating stress responses** (Moray et al., 2022)

### Consumer Awareness and Demand for Change

Research reveals growing consumer awareness of manipulation and demand for ethical alternatives.

#### Consumer Sentiment Research

- 82% of consumers prefer marketing campaigns that use their data in a responsible way (DigitallyAlex, 2024)
- 89% of consumers say they would be more likely to buy from businesses that protect their well-being (Deloitte, 2023)
- 75% of consumers are uncomfortable buying from businesses with poor data ethics (Cisco, 2023)

#### Behavioural Evidence

- Ad blocker usage has increased by 280% since 2015 (PageFair, 2023)
- Growing preference for brands with authentic, non-manipulative communication
- Rising demand for digital wellness tools and platform alternatives

#### Generational Trends

- 73% of Gen Z consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable products (First Insight, 2023)
- Growing awareness of psychological manipulation techniques among digital natives
- Increasing willingness to pay premium prices for genuinely ethical alternatives

# 6 CASE STUDIES IN EMERGING ETHICAL PRACTICE

## Early Industry Leaders

Several brands are beginning to demonstrate elements of responsible attention management:

### Patagonia's Anti-Consumption Approach

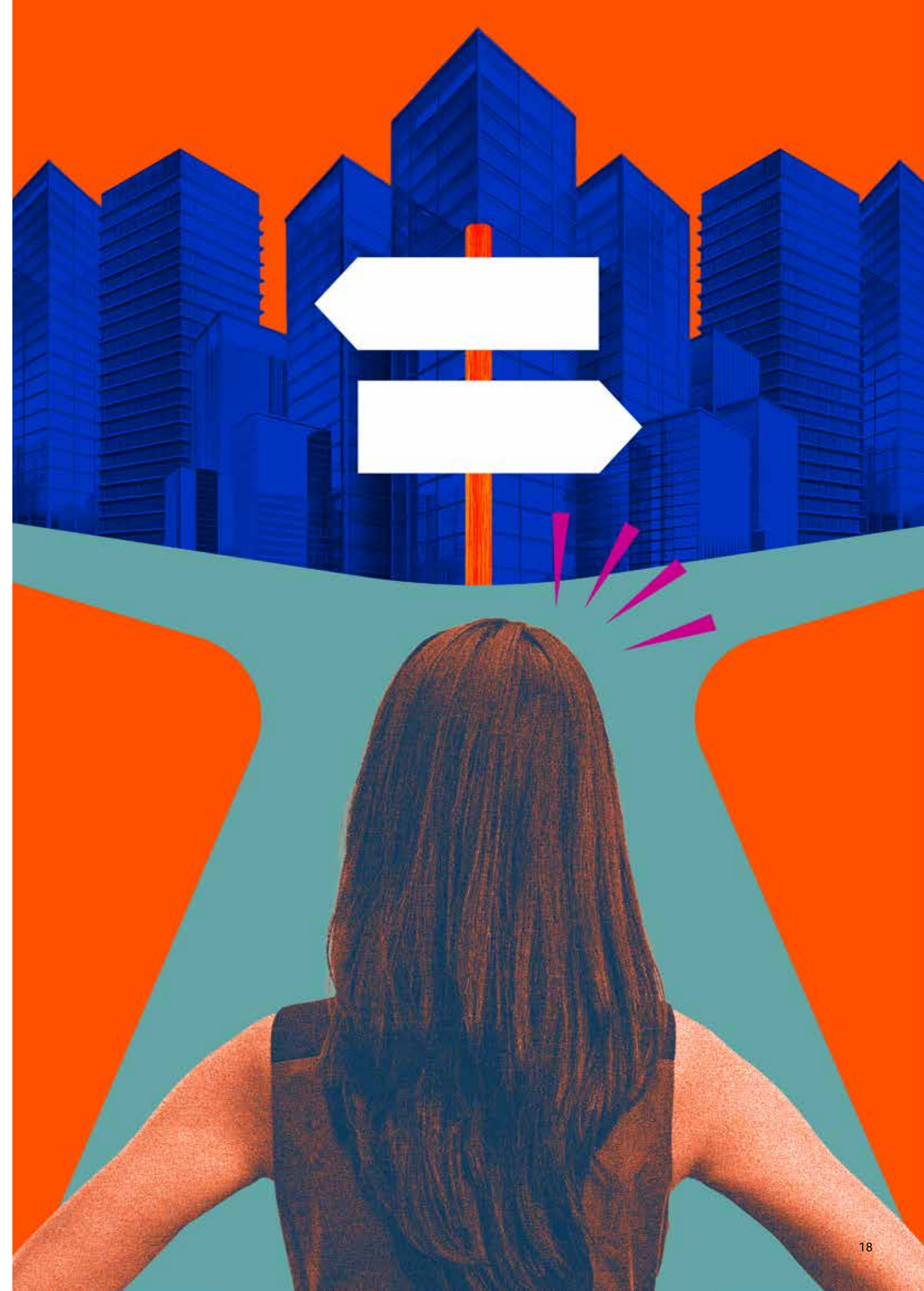
- "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign challenged overconsumption and fast fashion
- Transparent supply chain reporting builds trust without manipulation
- Environmental activism provides genuine value rather than extracting attention
- Comprehensive mental health benefits for employees demonstrate internal consistency

### Ben & Jerry's Values-Driven Communication

- Values-driven marketing supports social causes rather than exploiting anxiety
- Transparent political advocacy builds authentic rather than manipulative connections
- Employee well-being programs demonstrate internal ethical consistency
- Authentic brand voice avoids anxiety-inducing urgency and FOMO tactics

### Dove's Reality-Based Beauty Standards

- Real Beauty campaigns actively challenge unrealistic beauty standards
- Investment in research on self-esteem and body image provides social value
- Educational programs for young people counter harmful industry practices
- Commitment to not retouching images provides authentic representation



# 7 TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM OF RESPONSIBLE MARKETING

## The Business Case for Ethical Transformation

Research demonstrates clear business advantages for brands that prioritise psychological well-being:

### Customer Relationship Benefits:

- **Ethical brands achieve 15-25% higher customer retention rates** (Cone Communications, 2023)
- **Trust-based relationships command 10-20% price premiums over manipulative alternatives** (Nielsen, 2023)
- **Referral rates increase by 30-40% for genuinely ethical brands** (Edelman, 2023)
- **Customer lifetime value improves significantly when well-being is prioritised**

### Risk Mitigation Advantages:

- Proactive ethical practices reduce regulatory compliance risks
- Strong customer relationships provide resilience during crises
- Ethical reputation attracts ESG-focused investors
- Reduced legal liability for psychological harm and manipulation

### Innovation and Growth Opportunities:

- **First-mover advantage in ethical marketing creates competitive differentiation**
- New product and service opportunities in the \$1.8 trillion well-being sector (McKinsey, 2024)
- Attraction of top talent who want to work for purpose-driven organisations
- Access to ESG investment capital increasingly focused on social impact

Trust and brand loyalty correlate strongly with ethical practices and genuine care

## Implementation Framework for Ethical Practice

### Content Strategy Transformation

- Replace engagement maximisation with well-being optimisation goals
- Design content that respects cognitive limits and attention capacity
- Eliminate manipulation techniques and dark patterns from all communications
- Create genuine value rather than exploiting psychological vulnerabilities

### Measurement Evolution

- Develop well-being metrics alongside traditional engagement metrics
- Track long-term customer mental health indicators and trends
- Include psychological impact assessment in ROI calculations
- Report transparently on social and mental health outcomes

### Design Principle Integration

- Natural stopping points instead of infinite scroll engagement hooks
- Transparent recommendation algorithms that users can understand and control
- User control over content exposure frequency and intensity
- Clear labelling of commercial content and manipulation attempts

### Vulnerable Population Protection

- Enhanced safeguards for minors and at-risk individuals
- Opt-out options for manipulative targeting and personalisation
- Mental health resources and support integrated into brand communications
- Active collaboration with mental health professionals on impact assessment

# 8 THE PATH FORWARD - FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

## Individual Brand Transformation Strategies

Every brand can begin implementing responsible attention management immediately:

### Immediate Assessment and Action Steps

- Comprehensive audit of current marketing practices for psychological manipulation techniques
- Implementation of well-being metrics alongside traditional engagement measurements
- Training programs for marketing teams on mental health impacts and ethical alternatives
- Establishment of ethical review processes for all campaigns and communications

### Medium-term Strategic Changes

- Complete redesign of content strategies to prioritise genuine value over engagement
- Investment in customer well-being research and longitudinal impact measurement
- Implementation of comprehensive vulnerable population protection measures
- Development of transparent reporting systems for mental health and social impacts

### Long-term Business Model Evolution

- Integration of well-being outcomes into core business strategy and success metrics
- Leadership in industry transformation through advocacy, example, and research
- Collaboration with mental health professionals and researchers on best practices
- Development of new business models that reward customer flourishing over attention extraction

**Trust-based relationships command 10-20% price premiums over manipulative alternatives**  
(Nielsen, 2023)

## The Regulatory Framework Evolution

### Essential Regulatory Elements for Protection

- Mandatory mental health impact assessments for major marketing campaigns
- Legal restrictions on psychological manipulation techniques and dark patterns
- Enhanced protection requirements for vulnerable populations
- Transparency requirements for algorithmic targeting and personalisation

### International Coordination Needs

- Harmonised standards across jurisdictions to prevent regulatory arbitrage
- Shared research and best practices between regulatory bodies
- Coordinated enforcement actions against harmful practices
- Trade agreement provisions addressing ethical marketing standards



# CONCLUSION

## THE IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE

### The Moment of Truth

The research presented in this report establishes beyond doubt that we stand at a critical juncture in the history of marketing and human well-being. The evidence leaves no room for debate: the current model of engagement-driven marketing is contributing to a mental health pandemic that affects millions of people and costs society billions of dollars annually.

Alvin Toffler's warnings about information overload have not only materialised - they have been deliberately engineered and amplified by an industry that has built its business model on the systematic exploitation of human psychology. We can no longer claim ignorance about the harm we cause.

## The Scale of Our Responsibility

The research demonstrates conclusively that brands are not passive participants in the attention economy - we are its primary architects. Every campaign we create, every algorithm we optimise, every engagement strategy we deploy has the power to either enrich or diminish human well-being. Current practices are demonstrably doing far more harm than good.

The statistics are undeniable:

- **Mental health disorders have skyrocketed alongside social media and engagement marketing adoption**
- **Anxiety rates among young people have increased by over 50% since 2010**
- **Depression, attention disorders, and social isolation are at historic highs**
- **The economic cost of mental health issues now exceeds \$2.5 trillion globally**

## The Business Case for Change

The research also demonstrates that implementing responsible marketing practices is not just a moral imperative - it is a business necessity:

### Consumer Demand is Clear:

- 89% of consumers prefer to buy from businesses that protect their well-being
- 82% of consumers want marketing campaigns that use data responsibly
- Growing consumer awareness is driving demand for ethical alternatives

### Business Benefits are Substantial:

- Ethical brands achieve 15-25% higher customer retention rates
- Trust-based relationships command 10-20% price premiums
- Referral rates increase by 30-40% for genuinely ethical brands
- Employee satisfaction and retention improve dramatically in purpose-driven organisations

### Risks of Inaction are Mounting:

- Regulatory backlash is accelerating across multiple jurisdictions
- Legal liability for psychological harm is becoming viable
- Consumer boycotts and reputational damage can destroy brand value
- Talent recruitment becomes impossible for brands seen as harmful

## A Call to Action

The research presented here should serve as a wake-up call for our entire industry. We cannot continue to plead ignorance about the mental health impacts of our work. The evidence is clear, the harm is documented, and the solution is available.

The time has come for the creative and marketing industry to embrace a new paradigm - one that acknowledges our role in the mental health crisis and takes responsibility for creating a healthier information ecosystem.

### To Marketing Leaders

Your next campaign has the power to either harm or heal. Your content strategy can either exploit or empower. Your success metrics can either reward manipulation or celebrate genuine value creation.

### To Creative Professionals

Your talent and creativity built this attention economy - and you have the power to rebuild it better. Use your skills to create content that truly serves human flourishing.

### To Business Executives

Your leadership determines whether your brand contributes to human flourishing or human suffering. The long-term sustainability of your business depends on the well-being of your customers.

### To the Industry

We have built something unprecedented in human history - a global system for influencing human psychology at scale. With that power comes unprecedented responsibility. We must use it wisely.

## The Future We Can Build

The research points toward a future where:

- Success is measured by genuine customer flourishing rather than psychological manipulation
- Creativity is channelled toward solving real human problems rather than exploiting vulnerabilities
- Technology serves human well-being rather than undermining it
- Marketing builds stronger communities rather than fragmenting them
- Brands compete on their ability to improve lives rather than capture attention

This future is not only possible - it is inevitable. The question is whether we will lead this transformation through proactive change, or be forced into it by regulation, consumer backlash, and competitive pressure.

**The evidence is clear.**

**The harm is documented.**

**The time for action is now.**

**We call this new essential brand pillar "Exospection". Look out for our Extraordinary Brand Framework white paper to learn more.**

*This report represents a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between brand marketing practices and mental health outcomes, establishing the research foundation for understanding the urgent need for industry transformation.*

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To find out more about our Extraordinary Brand Framework and Tool-kit, or our wider research call Bonfire Creative Intelligence on

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