Children and their brands:
How young consumers relate to brands

Purpose: To understand and explain the process by which child consumers form relationships with brands. Specifically, we attempt to understand how child consumers conceptualize brands, why and how they decide to engage in relationships with brands, and why they decide to break up with brands but sometimes reconcile with them.

Methodology: A mixed methodology was followed in this research. Based on an ethnographic approach, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted among girls ranging from eight to 12 years old. Subsequently, a survey was completed by 122 children (boys and girls) to quantitatively examine the hypotheses formulated after the qualitative phase.

Findings: Findings from both the qualitative and quantitative studies highlight and confirm that children conceptualize brands according to visual branding components, signs, and promotional activities. Furthermore, children make moral evaluations of brand behaviors and judge them as "good" or "bad." More importantly, we propose two typologies: one for the reasons why children decide to engage in a positive relationship and another for why children engage in a negative relationship with a brand. Additionally, we found that children report having an active or passive relationship role according to the characteristics of the brand relationship. Moreover, despite their young age, children report having broken up relationships with several brands; the reasons are categorized into positive and negative break-ups. Finally, we found that positive break-ups lead to a more probable brand relationship reconciliation than negative break-ups.

Originality: Despite a vast body of literature in the child consumer behavior field, there is scarce research regarding brand relationship phenomena. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical research conducted with child consumers addressing brand relationship formation, dissolution, and reconciliation.

Keywords: Brand relationships, children, relationship breakup, brand relationship reconciliation, mixed method.

Article type: Research paper

Introduction

"They are tomorrow's consumers, so start talking with them now, build that relationship when they're younger, and you've got them as an adult" (Lucy Hughes, *Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood*).

Children worldwide have become an important and unique market segment for practically every product category, from toys and clothing to cell phones, computers, and even financial services. In recent years there have been many important changes in children's family composition: women started to work outside the home and families became smaller, which increased the importance attributed to each child (Fiates et al., 2008). This may be a reason for the involvement of children in consumption decisions (Foxman, Tansuhaj, and Ekstrom, 1989).

Consumers develop relationships with brands throughout their lives (Fournier, 1998), consuming countless branded products. Importantly, some of these relationships are developed at an early age, as children (Ji, 2002). However, research on the brand relationship phenomenon in children is scarce. The main purpose of this study is to clarify the process by which children form relationships with brands. Specifically, we attempt to understand how children as consumers conceptualize brands; we also investigate why and how children engage in positive or negative brand relationships; identify the reasons why young consumers decide to break up with brands and examine how a brand relationship reconciliation can take place.

Consumers relate to Brands

In recent decades, a growing body of knowledge has developed within brand-consumer relationship theory (for a recent review of this line of literature, see Macinnis and Folkes, 2017). As relationships with brands have been an important part of consumer

development, we can find research focusing on it. One of the first empirical studies conducted in this domain is the seminal work of Susan Fournier (1998), in which she offers empirical evidence from three adult women about the existence of consumer-brand bonds. In her work, Fournier presents a typology with 15 different types of relationships a consumer can have with a brand. Almost 20 years have passed since Fournier's work, and research has expanded in many different topics such as brands as relationship partners, brand relationship types, brand attachment, aversion to betrayal, and brand relationship norms (Macinnis and Folkes, 2017). The present research project builds upon this body of literature and aims to extend these findings to a new unexplored context: children as consumers.

How Children relate to Brands

Children's consumer behavior is a well-studied topic in the marketing discipline. One fundamental premise in this area is that children differ from adults in many marketing phenomena. For example, consumer socialization is one of the most studied issues regarding children's consumer behavior. John (1999) developed a conceptual framework that identifies age-related patterns across areas, describes major characteristics of knowledge and reasoning at different ages, and identifies developmental mechanisms behind these changes. In addition, Moschis and Churchill (1978) conducted an empirical study concerning children's consumer socialization processes and found that family, mass media, school, and peers are the most important socialization agents for children. More recent investigations have found that reverse socialization also exists, whereby consumer socialization occurs from children to parents (Ekström, 2007).

Other marketing literature focuses on children's values and behaviors. It is logical to think that adults as the providers of resources in the household and for the family are the ones making decisions, but the influence of the child on family decision-making has also been studied (Foxman, Tansuhaj, and Ekstrom, 1989). It has been established that the child influences consumer decisions based on their assertiveness and the mother's level of child centeredness (Berey, 1968). Children's attempts to influence purchases may decrease somewhat with age depending on the type of product, but a mother's yielding to request increases with age (Ward and Wackman, 1972). In summary, the influence of children on

decision-making can be seen in many areas, but a relevant topic, scarcely studied, is the effect that brands have on children's lives because of the impact of children's decisions later in life when they are more independent consumers.

Studies have shown that brands play a major role in children's lives (Hemar-Nicolas, et al., 2015). Children recognize brands as young as age three; they can name multiple brands in different product categories, mention brand names as an important type of product information, and often request products by their brand name (John, 1999). Children even make assumptions about others based on the products and brands they own. In their study, Elliott and Leonard (2004) found that children form stereotypes about the owners of trainers, and that these opinions are so strongly held that children would prefer to talk to someone wearing branded trainers than unbranded trainers. These findings show clear evidence that children are able to understand the meaning and symbolism that brands offer (Belk et al., 1984).

Scarce literature exists regarding how children relate to brands. Fournier (1998) was one of the first to offer empirical evidence of the existence of children-brand relationships. She reported a type of brand relationship called childhood friendships: "Infrequently engaged, affectively laden relation reminiscent of earlier times. It yields comfort and security of past self." In the same way, Chaplin and John (2005) provide evidence of the development of self-brand connections among children and adolescents. Additionally, Ji (2002) conducted a qualitative study with three children and reported that they developed relationships with a broad range of brands, and that these relationships are imbedded in the social environment in which children live and grow. Other investigations on this topic have also found the existence of brand communities among children (Flurry et al., 2014).

Although, as mentioned above, there is a vast body of literature on the topic of children's consumer behavior, there has been little research regarding brand relationship phenomena. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical research conducted with child consumers addressing the formation, dissolution, and reconciliation of brand relationships. It is important to study the development of these brand relationships among children because many of the cognitions and behaviors people develop during childhood persist into adulthood (Connell et al., 2014). Furthermore, because companies pay more attention to their young customers, it is important to study how young people relate to their brands so

managers can build strong brands that children can rely on. The purpose of the next studies is to understand and explain the process by which child consumers form relationships with brands. Specifically, we attempt to understand how child consumers conceptualize brands, why and how they decide to engage in relationships with brands, and why they decide to break up with brands but sometimes reconcile with them. Thus, this will allow us to develop a complete understanding of child consumers in terms of this marketing phenomenon.

Study 1: Qualitative

Methodology

With a view to exploring how children relate to brands, this research is divided into two studies, the first one using a qualitative approach and the second one a quantitative method. To develop the qualitative study, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted among girls aged between eight and 12 years old from upper-middle-class families. Only children within Piaget's (1964) concrete operational stage of development remained in the sample. In this first study, all subjects were girls since women tend to develop stronger brand relationships (Sherrod, 1989). This purposeful case sampling propitiated data saturation (Suri, 2011).

The interviews, which were conducted in Monterrey, Mexico (a major metropolitan city with a human development index equivalent to developed countries like Canada, Norway or the United States), lasted 75 minutes, on average, and were recorded. In all cases, at least one parent and child agreed to participate in the study. Participants were recruited by the snowball sampling method; if both parent and child agreed to participate, the interview was conducted. The interviews were conducted in the child's room, which helped the child remember the brands she knew, used, and preferred. It also enabled the child to feel relaxed in a familiar environment. The profile of participants is shown in Table 1; the children's names were changed to ensure anonymity.

[Insert table 1 here]

The data collection method employed throughout the study was the in-depth interview guide, which first asked the child to mention the first brand she remembered in a certain product category (top of mind) in order to elicit brands in the child's mind and let her know she knew many brands and that "she was an expert on the topic." Children took this exercise as a game; all the children were able to name one brand for every product category. The children were then encouraged to tell stories about their favorite or least favorite brands.

Since drawings are an excellent tool to encourage children to dialogue (Trollvik, et al., 2011), in the middle of the interview, the interviewer asked the child to draw "something that had happened while using one product of your favorite brand." This exercise helped the child express her ideas clearly and contributed to keep the subjects engaged during the interview process. After the child had finished the drawing, pictures were taken, and the child was asked to explain and narrate the situation drawn. Previous qualitative research with children have concluded that the analysis of drawings, complemented by a subsequent discussion of these drawings in the context of their production, has the potential of revealing a more nuanced depiction of concepts, emotions, and information in an expressive, empowering, and personally relevant manner (Literat, 2013).

All interviews (including the discussion of the drawings) were transcribed verbatim along with the field notes taken during the interview process, which included aspects that complemented the audio recording (i.e. the interviewer's observations regarding the child's room, the child's facial expressions regarding certain brands and topics, brands that were visible and mentioned or unmentioned by the child, branded products that were taken or ignored by the child during the interview, to mention some.) The final product was a 120-page document, which was the data source during the data analysis process.

The data analysis was conducted in an iterative manner (Spiggle, 1994); the data source was read several times in order to identify the themes, subthemes, and codes. These categorizations were changed many times as new themes emerged from the data. We finished analyzing the data when it was seen that new themes stopped emerging.

Findings

As the interviews were originally conducted in Spanish, we have endeavored to translate the quotes without altering the original meanings. This section will explain the four principal themes identified: children's brand definition, children's brand morality, characteristics of children's brand relationships and the relationship role, and children's brand relationship break-ups.

1. CHILDREN'S BRAND DEFINITION

This broad theme explains how young consumers understand and conceptualize brands. Specifically, we found that child consumers define brands as the visual branding components, as signs, and as promotional activities. See fig. 1 for a visual representation of this theme.

1.1 Brands are the visual branding components: Children understand brands as everything salient in the marketplace: labels, commercial names, colors, figures, logos, packaging, and so forth.

"This is a brand," pointing her finger at the GAP logo on her t-shirt (Patricia, 9).

"It is the things you have; the name, the colors, the little figures… even the packaging," (Sofía, 11).

1.2 Brands are signs: child consumers are aware of the signs brands communicate, not only to others but also to them.

A quality sign: "… and so you know if what you're buying is of good quality or not, by the brand" (Victoria, 9).

A differentiating sign: "It is a little drawing companies use to make their products better than others" (Melissa, 10).

"It sounds like leaving a mark, and to make something no longer what it is and now change it to be something different from the rest" (Mónica, 12).

1.3 Brands are promotional activities: Children also understand brands as every promotional effort companies apply to persuade consumers.

"It is all companies do to make people who go to the stores buy their products… well, they put commercials on TV, in stores, in brochures, get discounts, lower the price for you to

buy it, put in the store more products so you buy them. Sometimes they even give you one free so you like it and then you will buy it" (Karen, 11).

[Insert figure 1 here]

Consistent with Arnas, Tas, and Ogul (2016) this understanding of brand names, brand logos, product packages and jingles/slogans about a brand affect children's brand awareness because they serve as hints. Other researchers have investigated brand components, finding that children use perceptual cues to classify products (John and Sujan, 1990) and that retrieving cues can help to store information in children memory (Macklin, 1994). More importantly, it has already been found that visual branding components such as brand characters help improve children's recall and recognition and also to develop a relationship with young consumers (Hémar-Nicolas and Gollety, 2012).

In line with these findings, we propose the following hypotheses:

H_{1a}: Child consumers define brands as the visual branding components

H_{1b}: Child consumers define brands as signs

H_{1c}: Child consumers define brands as promotional activities

2. BRANDING MORALITY

According to the findings, children do make moral evaluations of brands' behaviors; they classify these behaviors as "good or bad." See figure 2 for a visual representation of this theme.

2.1 Brands are good when they:

Make you look better: "Brands are good, because if we did not have them, then we would not have clothes or anything that have brands. And I would not like to wear things that have no brand. Branded things are prettier" (Vanessa, 9).

Help you not to waste your money: "Yes, they are good. If things did not have brands, then you would not know what you are buying, what if you are buying something of poor quality that is not going to help you?" (Carmen, 10).

Help the least fortunate: "That brand is good because it helps children's hospitals, so children can receive the attention they need… yes, they donate money to hospitals" (Ana, 12).

Make products that meet our needs: "Brands are good because they give us the things we need and like" (Alejandra, 8).

2.2 Brands are bad when they:

Visually pollute: "Yes, they can be bad. For example, when they are not selling their products that much they put a lot of advertising everywhere and that creates visual pollution, which we saw in my art class once… and that pollution is bad because it affects the view of the city. We used to pass over a hill where you could see Fundidora Park. I liked to go out there because it looked nice, especially at night. Now the only thing you can see is the Coca-Cola advertising. There, Coke is being a bad brand" (Ana, 12).

Promote harmful products: "Sometimes they advertise products that are bad for us, for our health, and so on" (Mónica, 12).

Manipulate consumers: "When brands make us buy something we do not need and thus spend money" (Karen, 11).

[Insert figure 2 here]

It has been said that children know what is good and bad based on what adults have imposed. But when getting older, children get autonomous so they can make moral judgments for their own (Piaget, 1932). Previous research has presented morality as something that is part of the children's life and existence, not something that will be developed as they grow up (Johansson, 2001). Similar to what has been found in adult consumer research; children make distinctions between brand behaviors. Furthermore, we have investigated about adverse behaviors toward the brand when consumers identify irresponsible corporate behavior, meaning bad brand behaviors (Grappi, Romani and Ragozzi, 2013). In the same way, corporate social responsibility represents good brand behaviors (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). As these have both been investigated in an adult context, no children literature has focused on these relevant evaluations of the brand that

kids make. There has been some research in children addressing the development of moral evaluations (Grueneich, 1982), but not specifically focusing on brand behaviors.

Because of these findings, we propose the following:

H_{2a}: Child consumers judge brands as morally good when they make them look better, help them not to waste their money, help the least fortunate, or make products that meet their needs.

H_{2b}: Child consumers judge brands as morally bad when they visually pollute, promote harmful products, or manipulate them to buy products they do not need.

3. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN'S BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

As a finding, we noticed that children do have most favorite and least favorite brands. Several relationship characteristics were identified from the data. These features were grouped in two categories: positive relationship characteristics and negative relationship characteristics. Positive characteristics lead children to form a positive relationship with the brand, making it a favorite one; while negative characteristics lead children to form a rather negative relationship with the brand, making it a not so favorite one. At the same time, children report having an active or passive relationship role according to these brand relationships characteristics. See a visual representation of this theme in fig. 3. Positive and negative characteristics of children's brand relationships are exhibited in tables 2 and 3, respectively.

[Insert table 2 here]

[Insert table 3 here]

3.1 Children's role in the relationship

Two main kinds of relationship roles were identified: a passive and an active role. In general, we found that a more positive relationship is more prone to allow a more active

role by the child in the brand relationship. On the other hand, a more negative relationship is more prone to allow a more passive role in the relationship by the child.

3.1.1 Passive relationship role: "Well, what I do is buy it… yes, I buy it or I ask my parents for those products…, that's what I do" (Victoria, 9).

3.1.2 Active relationship role: "I told my friends about this brand, and now they buy it as well… I liked them on Facebook and sometimes comment on their posts… I also follow them on Instagram. I love the pictures they post because they give me new ideas about how to use their products" (Ana, 12).

[Insert figure 3 here]

According to Park, Eisingerich, and Park (2013), consumers make an inclusion between the brand characteristics and their own, including these different resources and characteristics of the other into the self in order to have a strong and positive relationship. On the other hand, if there is a distant relationship to their characteristics, a negative relationship will take place. More importantly, these findings are consistent with previous work regarding the self-concept connection that must exist between the young consumer and the brand in order to develop a positive brand relationship (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Previous research has also dealt with how and to what extent a child–brand relationship is conditioned by the child's bond with people and in-groups and, inversely, how these interpersonal relationships can influence the child's relationship with a brand (Rodhain, and Aurier, 2016). This paper's findings help extend previous work in this field by providing evidence about how a child brand relationship is conditioned by the brand's characteristics (relationship characteristics).

For this reason, it is important not only to study the effect of social interactions (interpersonal relationships) in children's brand relationships but also to have a clear understanding of the effect that brand's characteristics have in this phenomenon. Since marketers have more control regarding the brand characteristics (relationship characteristics) than social interactions, it is far more important for marketers to understand this in order to develop brands with appropriate characteristics for children. Regarding the brand relationship role, previous literature has found that children's desire for giving

recommendations depends on the child participation in a brand network and experienced emotions (Hook, Baxter, and Kulczynski, 2016).

These findings make us hypothesize the following:

H_{3a}: Positive (negative) relationship characteristics make child consumers to adopt a more active (passive) role in the brand relationship.

H_{3b}: The relationship between valence of the relationship characteristics and the relationship role is mediated by the valence of the brand relationship. This is, positive (negative) relationship characteristics cause children to form a positive (negative) brand relationship, and this cause children to adopt a more active (passive) role in the brand relationship.

4. CHILDREN'S BRAND RELATIONSHIP BREAK-UPS

Despite their young age, child consumers report having ended their relationships with several brands. Two types of break-ups emerged from the data: a positive breakup and a negative breakup. More importantly, we found that a positive breakup leads children to have positive feelings towards the brand, thus a brand relationship reconciliation is probably to take place in the near future; on the other hand, a negative breakup leads children to have negative feelings and revenge behaviors towards the brand. Thus, a brand relationship reestablishment is not probably to take place in the future. See a visual representation of this theme in figure 4.

4.1 A positive breakup

Kids report having a positive breakup because of a parental decision, because a brand is no longer relevant in their life, and because a better solution arrives:

Parental decision: "We used to go to McDonald's, but my mom stopped taking me there… I don't know, she said it was not good for us… we now go to new places I also like" (Patricia, 9).

Brand no longer relevant: "No, I don't eat Gerber anymore because I am older now" (Sofía, 11).

A better solution arrives: "Before having my American Girl doll I used to play with my Barbies, but I like my American Girl doll better… I don't play with my Barbies anymore" (Alejandra, 8).

4.2 A negative breakup

This negative breakup results from unmet expectations and cognitive dissonance.

Unmet expectations: "Last Christmas I got the Mi Alegria's chocolate factory. I was very excited because in the TV ad it looked so much fun. The toy's box looked pretty cool; the chocolates on the box were in many colors and shapes, but when I opened it and made the chocolates they were all brown and had very few shapes to choose. I won't ask for a Mi Alegria toy again" (Vanessa, 9).

Cognitive dissonance: "I was saving money for the next time my mom and I went to McAllen, but I spent most of my savings one time I was with my aunt and bought a Timex watch… the next day I was like why did I buy it? I should have saved my money so I could buy more and better things at McAllen… I wouldn't buy another Timex watch" (Carmen, 10).

4.3 Children experience negative feelings after a negative breakup: When young consumers have a negative breakup, they show signs of revenge by telling their friends about their bad experiences and having negative feelings towards that brand.

[Insert figure 4 here]

Consistent with Mathur, Moschis, and Lee (2003), these findings suggest that consumers brand preferences change and incur in a breakup in order to cope with the new life conditions they are experimenting. In the same way, other authors have studied break-ups between consumers and brands (Fajer and Schouten, 1995; Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli and Friedmann, 2009; Coulter and Ligas, 2000) but in the children context, this is the first time this aspect is investigated in depth. It is thought that at a young age, there would be no reasons for children to break up with a brand as they are growing up and

discovering things, but it is interesting to discover that children do get involved in brand break-ups.

In a formal way, we propose the following hypotheses regarding these findings:
H_{4a}: A positive (negative) brand breakup makes child consumers more (less) prone to reconcile with the brand.
H_{4b}: The relationship between valence of brand breakup and brand reconciliation is mediated by the valence of the brand feelings. This is, a positive (negative) breakup makes children to experience positive (negative) feelings towards the brand, and these feelings make children more (less) prone to reconcile with the brand.

Study 2: Quantitative

Methodology

The main objective of study two is to quantitatively measure the constructs and relationships previously found in the qualitative phase. Furthermore, we also want to test these findings in an empirical way so that these results can be generalizable. This study addresses the main limitation of study one by also taking into account boys, not only girls. Thus, we conducted study two, which builds on our qualitative study and uses sophisticated statistical analyses to address these questions.

Considering the qualitative findings, items were generated to measure each one of the constructs previously found. The final questionnaire was 42 Likert-type items long. Some constructs (visual branding components and promotional activities) were measured with images instead of statements because children understood these concepts better in a visual manner in a pretest conducted with two girls and two boys. Previous research with children has also employed visual stimuli (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). The wording of some items was also changed because these children did not quite understand the meaning of them. A second pretest was conducted with two girls; the final questionnaire was discussed with them and we considered they perfectly understood the meaning of every item. The questionnaire was designed in Qualtrics and personally administered with the aid

of an iPad. The final sample size was 122 kids (52% boys, M_{age} = 10.03 years, SD = 1.43). See table 4 for the profile of the sample.

[Insert table 4 here]

All surveys were personally conducted by the authors in two private elementary schools located in Monterrey, Mexico. Each survey lasted, on average, 10 minutes to complete. At the beginning of the questionnaire, we explained to the kid how to use the five-point Likert scale (*strongly agree to strongly disagree*), previous studies have already proven the success of the Likert-scale in children (Laerhoven, Zaag-Loonen, and Derkx, 2004). The questionnaire was originally designed and administered in Spanish. An English translation of the items and measures used in study two is offered in table 5.

As previously mentioned, some items were measured using images instead of verbal items. Coca-Cola was used as a brand example to illustrate these visual items since Coca-Cola is a brand very well known by children according to our qualitative study. Also, previous research in the children behavior field has used Coca-Cola as a stimulus in their methodology (Zhang and Sood, 2002).

All statistical analyses were run three times: one with the aggregated database, and the other two employing a segmentation by gender. Since there were no significant differences in findings between gender, only aggregated results are reported.

[Insert table 5 here]

Findings

1. CHILDREN'S BRAND DEFINITION

To test hypotheses H_{1a}-H_{1c}, we conducted a factor analysis to the children's brand definition items (as specified in table 5). The extraction method employed throughout the study was principal components and the orthogonal Varimax rotation. Table 6 shows the results of this analysis. As can be seen, all three hypotheses are supported by the data. All items are grouped with their respective dimension/factor.

The eigenvalue greater than one criterion (Kaiser, 1960) confirms that three dimensions truly exist in the analyzed data, factor 4 has an eigenvalue of 0.79. The scree plot also supports the three-dimension solution by showing that the proposed solution is the optimal one (Cattell, 1966). As suggested by Hayton, Allen and Scarpello (2004), a parallel analysis was also conducted, confirming the three-factor extraction solution. On the other hand, the reliability measure of Cronbach's α fulfills the suggested threshold of 0.7 (Malhotra, et al., 2012). These analyses provide statistical support for the previously stated hypotheses H_{1a} – H_{1c}.

[Insert table 6 here]

2. BRANDING MORALITY

H_{2a} and H_{2b} are confirmed by another factor analysis. Good brand behavior items show the higher loadings with factor 1, at the same time bad brand behavior items show the higher loadings with factor 2. That is, all items are grouped in their hypothesized dimension. Both, the eigenvalue greater than one criterion and the scree plot suggest the two hypothesized dimensions. The parallel analysis confirms this solution. These two factors explain almost 70% of the total variance. Cronbach's α also meets the expected value of 0.7 in order to accomplish reliability in the measures. All these statistical results support the two hypotheses previously stated.

[Insert table 7 here]

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN'S BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

Hypotheses from this finding require first to confirm the existence of the dimension characteristics of children's brand relationships, which is truly identified as can be seen in table 8. All items present a high loading with the first factor, which accounts for almost 70% of total variance. The Cronbach's α surpasses the threshold of 0.7. It is important to mention that all positive characteristics have a positive loading, while all negative characteristics have a negative loading. Therefore, we can conclude that a high score in this

factor indicates the characteristics associated with a brand are overall positive, whereas a low score indicates the characteristics associated with a brand are overall negative.

Once identified the dimension of the children's brand relationships characteristics, the score is calculated with the regression procedure. We tested H_{3a} and H_{3b} using the Process SPSS macro from Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007, model 4). As can be seen in figure 5, the regression betas support H_{3a}. Positive (negative) relationship characteristics make child consumers to adopt a more active (passive) role in the brand relationship (β = 0.52, $p < 0.001$).

H_{3b} is also supported by confirming that the relationship between valence of the relationship characteristics and the relationship role is mediated by the valence of the brand relationship. Results show that positive relationship characteristics make children more prone to develop a positive relationship with the brand ($\beta = 1.12$, $p < 0.001$). At the same time, a positive brand relationship mediates the connection between valence of the relationship characteristics and an active relationship role ($\beta = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$). This is, positive relationship characteristics cause a positive brand relationship, and a positive brand relationship causes a more active role in the relationship. The Sobel test is significant (z = 7.46, p = 0.001). Furthermore, the 95% bootstrapping estimation confidence interval of indirect effect (5000 samples) does not contain zero (.86, .47), thus supporting mediation. Although it is not a full mediation, it is important to notice that the indirect effect is bigger than the direct effect.

[Insert table 8 here]

[Insert figure 5 here]

4. CHILDREN'S BRAND RELATIONSHIP BREAK-UPS

Hypotheses from this finding require first to identify the dimension of the valence of the brand breakup, which is truly identified according to table 9. All positive items have a high positive loading with factor one and all negative items have a high negative loading. A high score in this factor indicates a positive breakup, whereas a low score indicates a

negative breakup. The Cronbach's α (.89) accomplishes the minimum accepted reliability measure.

[Insert table 9 here]

The score for factor one was calculated and used to test H_{4a} and H_{4b} employing the same statistical procedures as in H_{3a} and H_{3b}. As can be seen in figure 6, the regression betas support H_{4a}. A positive (negative) brand breakup makes child consumers more (less) prone to reconcile with the brand ($\beta = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$).

H_{4b} is also supported by showing that the relationship between valence of brand breakup and brand reconciliation is mediated by the valence of the brand feelings. Results show that a positive breakup makes children develop positive feelings towards the brand ($\beta = 1.32$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, these positive feelings cause a more probable brand relationship reconciliation ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$). For this analysis, the Sobel test is significant ($z = 3.90$, $p = 0.001$). Additionally, the 95% bootstrapping estimation confidence interval of indirect effect (5000 samples) does not contain zero (.13, .90), thus supporting mediation. In this model the direct effect is slightly bigger than the indirect effect; nevertheless, the mediation accounts for almost half of the total effect.

[Insert figure 6 here]

Discussion

This paper has addressed an important gap in the literature. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study that has investigated child consumer behavior regarding brand relationship formation, dissolution, and reconciliation. This paper explored how child consumers conceptualize and understand brands. Consistent with previous findings, this research has found that children are aware of the branding components salient in the marketplace (John 1999; Arnas, Tas, and Ogul, 2016). This research is different, however, because it shows that these visual branding components not only are relevant to children but that children understand and conceptualize brands according to them. Brand characters (a specific visual branding component) have been found to encourage young consumers to

develop relationships with those brands (Hémar-Nicolas and Gollety, 2012). This research extends these findings by showing that these brand characters can also help children understand and conceptualize brands.

Our findings also contribute to the consumer socialization literature since promotional activities and visual branding components are important socialization agents for children. This is critical because marketers control their promotional strategies and brand components. For instance, previous research has established that children are able to understand branding symbolism and external signs or how they are perceived for using a particular brand (Belk et al. 1984; Elliott and Leonard, 2004). Our work, on the other hand, has investigated the internal signs of branding (i.e. quality, originality). In short, this research has found that child consumers not only understand and appreciate the signs that brands send to others but also to themselves.

Children's moral judgment is well documented in the child psychology field (Grueneich, 1982; Piaget, 1932). However, this is the first study that offers evidence about these moral evaluations regarding brand behaviors. Consistent with previous literature in adult consumers (Grappi, Romani, and Ragozzi, 2013), we found that children also make these moral evaluations of brands as "good" or "bad." More importantly, this research identifies the main drivers of children's moral evaluations of brand behaviors, helping to understand past findings suggesting that morality exists in children's life and existence (Johansson, 2001). In the same path, corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices have been advertised exclusively to adult consumers, but our findings suggest that children are also aware of these CSR business practices. We propose that CSR practices regarding children as consumers are an unexplored field that can have real potential.

As previously pointed out in the literature, children form positive, neutral, and even negative bonds with brands among a wide range of product categories (Ji, 2002). This study helps us understand this complex phenomenon by providing new evidence of these children-brand bonds. Moreover, this paper provides explanations about why children form positive or negative relationships with brands. Previous studies have described these bonds superficially, by offering descriptions but not explanations. Park, Eisingerich, and Park (2013) propose that there must be some inclusion between the brand and the consumer for a positive brand relationship to develop. Our work extends previous research by suggesting

some brand characteristics that allow an inclusion of the young consumer; consequently, a positive brand relationship emerges. This research also proposes some brand characteristics that do not allow an inclusion with the child; thus, a negative brand relationship emerges.

The literature has examined how adult consumers form relationships with brands, and the role of consumers in that relationship (Fournier, 1998; Story and Hess, 2006). However, there is no research on the role of children in these brand bonds. We add to the literature by providing some relevant findings. Our research identifies drivers that make children more likely to assume a more active role in their relationship with a brand. We found that children's desire for giving recommendation depends not only on their participation in a brand network and experienced emotions (Hook, Baxter, and Kulczynski, 2016) but also on the brand characteristics and the valence of the brand relationship. Whereas previous research has described reverse socialization (Ekström, 2007), this work extends this line of literature by adding this phenomenon as a reason for children to develop a positive relationship with a brand.

At the same time, previous literature has explored the end of brand-consumer relationships among adult consumers (Coulter and Ligas, 2000; Fajer and Schouten, 1995). Our findings advance this line of investigation by showing how and why young consumers break up with their brands. Consistent with previous literature, we found that children end brand relationships partly because of changes in their lives (Mathur et al., 2003). Furthermore, we suggest that not all brand break-ups are negative for children and that these positive ruptures are not characterized by resentment, as previously pointed out (Hemetsberger et al., 2009). We propose that under certain circumstances, child consumers have a positive breakup with a brand, which makes brand relationship reconciliation more likely to occur in the future. However, we also suggest certain circumstances that would generate a rather negative breakup with a brand, making a brand relationship reconciliation less likely. Also, consistent with previous literature in adult consumers, children exhibit signs of revenge and negative feelings after a brand transgression, which leads them to have a negative breakup with that brand (Grégoire et al., 2009), making them not that different from adults in this case.

In sum, it has been seen that consumers can relate to brands since a young age. This research adds to literature by showing that children define brands by knowing it is

composed by visual branding components, signs, and promotional activities from the brand. At the same time, children can recognize and categorize brand morality. Like adults, they engage in relationships with brands, but depending on the characteristics of the relationship, they form a positive or negative relationship. If positive characteristics are present in the relationship, children will have a positive relationship and have an active role. Other findings suggest that children have positive or negative break-ups with brands, with the latter being less conducive to a reconciliation. With these findings, we help to understand child consumers, whose connection with brands had not yet been investigated.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations should be considered before generalizing the findings here described. An important limitation is that only children from upper-middle-class families were interviewed, future research should include children from different economic backgrounds. Also, children who participated in the quantitative study were gathered from schools. The results might be different for children who are home-schooled because they may not have the same influence from peers. It would be interesting if subsequent research shows differences for such children, who may also get involved with brands but in a different way.

Another limitation that we faced is the sample size for each age group (eight to twelve). In a whole, the sample was appropriate, but to find differences and segment by age, the number of participants in each age group should be bigger. This can benefit literature and advance our research by discovering how the brand relationships develop as children grow up. Additionally, a better understanding can happen if an examination of specifically the transition from children to adult, takes place. It can help to develop a complete model of how children and adults can be different but similar at the same time.

Also, the context here was in an emerging country such as Mexico. Even though, we did not found any cultural aspect; it would be interesting if future research focuses on differences between countries or regions.

Other interesting future research concerning our findings is the morality that children have and use to differentiate between “good” and “bad” brand behaviors. This conclusion suggests that children pay attention to CSR strategies from companies, affecting

their visualization of the brand. As today, CSR research in marketing has not included the impact it has on children but it would be remarkable to analyze the influence these strategies have on children's perception and relationships with brands.

Additionally, our findings can be analyzed with relation to other variables. For instance, the brand characteristics here found can have an impact on brand attachment. Investigating this relationship will advance the literature to know if by paying more attention to these elements, brands can benefit by getting more attachment from children. Also, as mentioned before, the brand breakup theme, here described in children as consumers, can have an impact on how brands act when the separation occurs. Even though we know some recovery strategies that work with adults (i.e. Muthukrishnan and Chattopadhyay, 2007), it can be inferred that different recovery strategies will work with children as they are looking for new brands to use as they grow up and become adults. For this reason, further research should analyze the best recovery strategies when a child breaks up with a brand, even more, if they know the breakup was positive or negative.

Other important concepts that have been developed in the brand literature but not specifically studied with children are brand loyalty, luxury brands, and brand love. For future studies, researchers can investigate these concepts in order to look at how they work differently with children than with adult consumers. These ideas along with the limitations can serve as future research for advancement in the topic. However, even though these limitations exist, they only affect the generalizability but not the validity of the findings here described.

We highly recommend building upon this paper in future studies and keep developing knowledge regarding this marketing phenomenon. We strongly encourage researchers to extend this study: more knowledge is needed to truly understand young consumers' behavior regarding their interactions and relationships with brands.

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Fig. 1 Children's Brand Definition

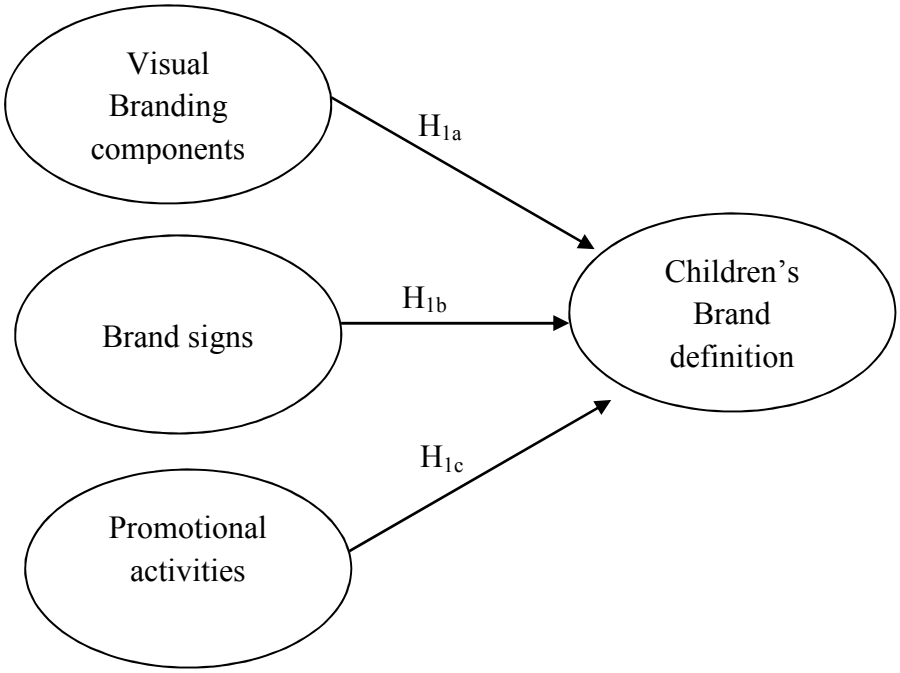


Fig. 2 Branding morality

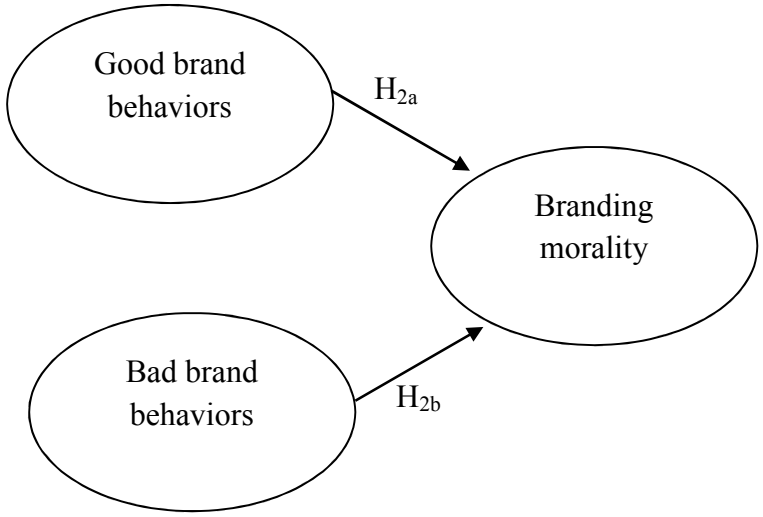


Fig. 3 Characteristics of children's brand relationships and the relationship role

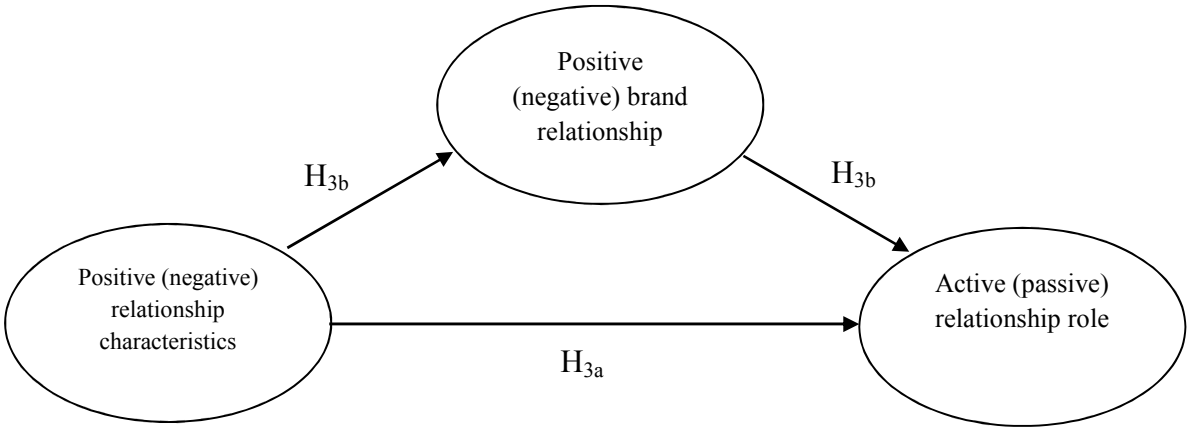


Fig. 4 Children's brand relationship break-ups

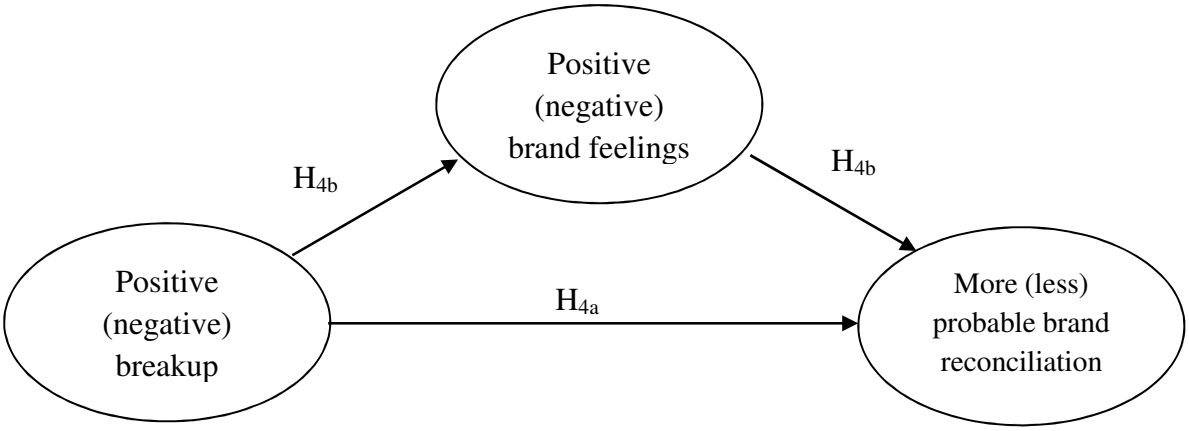
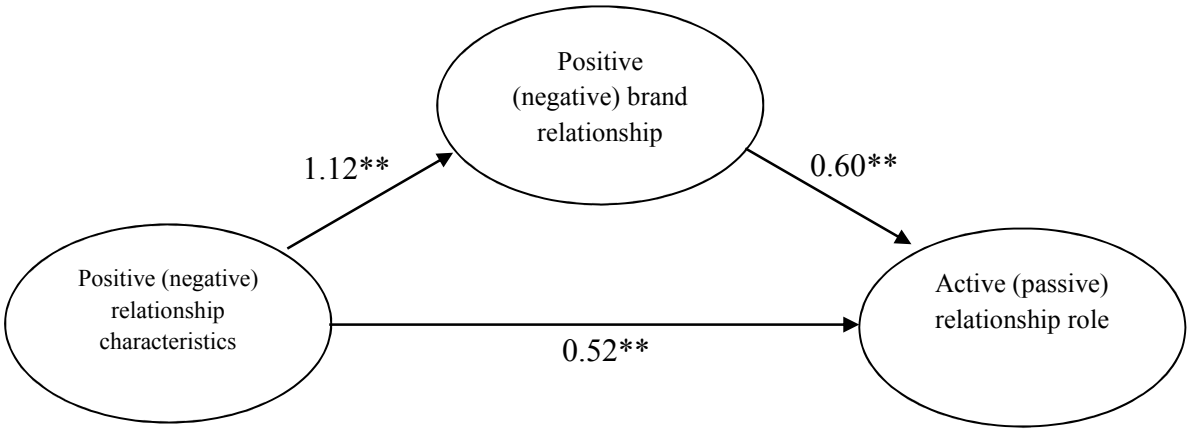
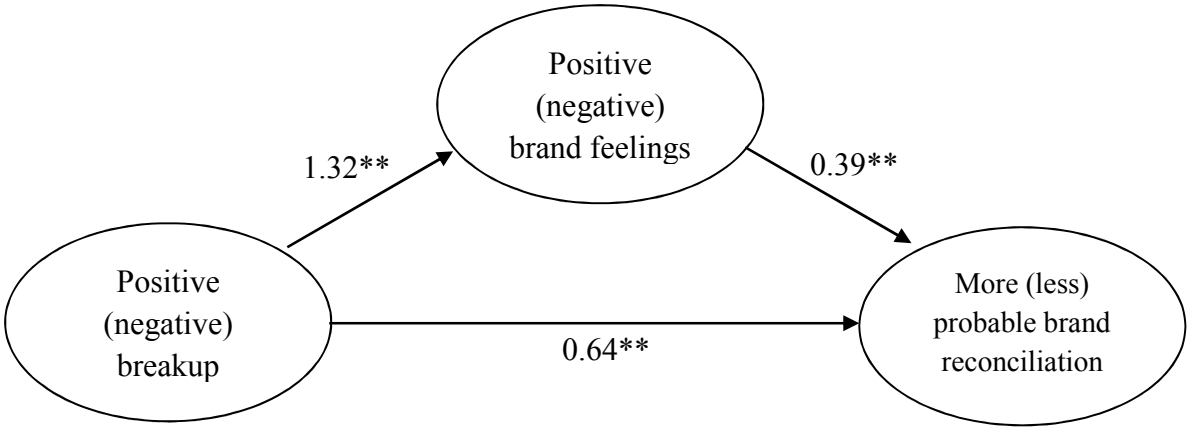


Fig. 5 Mediation analysis of Characteristics of children's brand relationships and the relationship role



**p<0.001, R^2 (first model) = 0.75, R^2 (second model) = 0.86

Fig. 6 Mediation analysis of Children's brand relationship breakups



**p<0.001, R^2 (first model) = 0.78, R^2 (second model) = 0.71

Table 1 Profile of participants in study 1

Number	Name	Age
1	Alejandra	8
2	Vanessa	9
3	Patricia	9
4	Victoria	9
5	Melissa	10
6	Carmen	10
7	Sofía	11
8	Karen	11
9	Ana	12
10	Mónica	12

Table 2 Positive characteristics of children's brand relationships

Relationship characteristic	Example quote
Autonomy	"One of my favorite products is my iPod touch; I bought it with money I saved from my last birthday party… I can do whatever I want with it, like watch YouTube videos, Netflix movies, play games… I do not have to ask for my parents' permission about what I watch or do on my iPod" (Vanessa, 9).
Parental complicity	"I really like Coca-Cola; you see my dad works at Coca-Cola, so we all like it. We drink it all the time when we eat at my house… there was one time we went to my grandparents' house to eat dinner, and they only had Pepsi, so my dad and I had to go to the OXXO (convenience store) to buy Coca-Cola, so we were able to eat… sometimes when we go to visit my uncles and aunts, I say to my dad that we need to bring some Coke with us, because sometimes they don't have it in their house" (Melissa, 10).
Reverse socialization	"Our new Sony TV is amazing. It has all these cool features you can do with it, like change the language and even connect it to the Internet, and only I know how to use it… my parents sometimes call me to teach them how to use it… a couple of times I have changed the language just for fun, and they do not know what to do, so they call me to change the language back to Spanish" (Karen, 11).
Sharing among friends	"My friends and I eat Cheetos and Takis during the break… sometimes some of us do not have money to buy them, but it does not matter because we all share… we mix them and pour a lot of hot sauce on them (Victoria, 9).
Trendsetter	"I was the first in my class to have a Kipling backpack and a pencil case. All of my friends liked them, so they started asking their parents to buy them a Kipling backpack as well… now many of my friends also have it (Sofía, 11).
Friendship bonding sign	"My best friend and I exchanged the little Kipling monkeys… I really like how it (my backpack) looks now. My backpack is purple with a pink monkey and my friend's is pink with a purple monkey. Once we were in the classroom and we changed the little monkeys. At first, it was for a class period, then for a day, then we changed them for the whole weekend and now we change them forever. I like my backpack more now… I like the way it looks, and when I see my backpack and I see the little pink monkey I remember my friend and the time we changed them" (Sofía, 11).

Family time	"On my birthday my family and I go to Incredible Pizza; we all play the arcade games to earn many tickets and exchange them for prizes… last time we went, my grandparent and my dad earned a lot of tickets in a basketball machine… altogether, we collected more than 2,000 tickets. We exchanged them for some water bottles for my cousins and me… I take that water bottle to school; I like it (Carmen, 10).
Social acceptance	“All the kids in my gym class have TOMS’ sneakers, so I asked my mom to buy me a pair of those sneakers… now I own two pairs, one white and one pink… I really like them and I also take care of them” (Karen, 11).
Sibling substitution	Take the case of Alejandra (8), as an example. She is an only child: "American Girl is my favorite (brand), I really like my doll. It is my favorite toy. I play all the time with her… there was one time I dropped her accidentally and one of her eyes broke, I was very scared but we took her to the American Girl Hospital and the doctors cured her. They gave me the doll's good health certificate and everything… yes, you can go to the restaurant that is inside the American Girl store. They put a little chair for your doll, and while you eat you can also play with your doll… my doll looks a little like me; I wanted her to have the same eye and hair color as me… sometimes we even dress alike. I have several dresses that are the same as the dresses of my doll but bigger."
Make life easier	“I use my iPad for school homework a lot. I have an app called photo math or something like that. You only have to take a picture of the problem and it shows you the result with the mathematical procedure and everything… my friend also recommended me this other app which gives you the dictionary definition of a word you say… I use these apps when I do my homework and I finish it very quickly (Melissa, 10).

Table 3 Negative characteristics of children's brand relationships

Relationship characteristic	Example quote
Parental imposition	"My mom buys me those juices to take to school, and I don't like them. I have told her but she keeps buying them anyway… sometimes I throw them away, but then I get thirsty and I have to drink water out of the school's drinking fountains (Vanessa, 9).
Social fear	"My friends were once talking about a boy who was wearing Pirma sneakers. They said that brand was of poor quality and ugly… no, I wouldn't wear those at all, I would be very embarrassed" (Mónica, 12).
Draws attention from their parents or siblings	"My older brother and I used to play games on the computer, but since he got his play station he doesn't play with me anymore… I have played a couple of times but I don't like it; he plays FIFA all the time and I don't like it" (Sofía, 11). "I don't remember the name of the brand but it is this (draws logo of Under Armour). My dad has sports clothes of this brand and he wears them when he goes with his friends to play soccer or basketball… I would prefer him to stay home with us" (Ana, 12).
Poor performance	"Those Bic pens are the worst. I used them at school, but the pens' ink stained the entire sheet… I had to do my whole homework all over again. Those pens are the worst" (Mónica, 12).

Table 4 Profile of participants in study 2

	Girls	Boys	Total
8 Years old	13	12	25
9 Years old	9	12	21
10 Years old	16	11	27
11 Years old	12	11	23
12 Years old	9	17	26
Total	59	63	122

Table 5 measures for study 2

Theme	Question	Construct	Item(s)
Children's brand definition	Is this image a brand?	Visual branding components	Image of a Coca-Cola label
			Image of the Coca-Cola logo
			Image of the red Coca-Cola color
			Image of a Coca-Cola bottle
			Image of the Coca-Cola bears
		Promotional activities	Image of a Coca-Cola billboard
			Image of a Coca-Cola brochure
			Image of a Coca-Cola sales promotion
			Image of a Coca-Cola merchandising
	Do you agree or disagree?	Signs	Brands help you identify high quality products
			Brands help you identify original products
			Brands help you identify products that are different from the rest
Branding morality	Brands are good when they…	Good brand behaviors	Make you look better
			Help you identify high quality products
			Help the least fortunate
			Sell products that help us in our lives
		Bad brand behaviors	Put a lot of advertising everywhere
			Sell harmful products
			Make us buy things we don't really need
Characteristics of relationships	Think about a brand you use every day	Positive characteristics	That brand lets me do whatever I want without asking my parents
			That brand lets me spend time with my family

			That brand lets me spent time with my friends
			That brand lets me do fun things with my parents
			That brand lets me teach adults how to use certain products
			That brand lets me be a trendsetter
			That brand lets me remember my best friend
			That brand is also used by my friends
			That brand lets me do my homework fast and easy
			That brand lets me play and not feel alone
		Negative characteristics	I didn't choose that brands, but my parents bought it for me
			My friends don't like that brand
			That brand makes my parents or siblings do not pay attention to me
			That brand has a bad performance
		Positive/negative relationship	How happy does that brand make you?
		Relationship role	I not only buy that brand but also recommend it to my friends
Brand relationship breakups	Think about a brand you used to use, but now you no longer use	Positive brand breakup	I stopped using that brand because my parents no longer wanted to buy it
			I stopped using that brand because I no longer need it
			I stopped using that brand because now I use a brand that is better
		Negative brand breakup	I stopped using that brand because it did not do what I expected it to do
			I stopped using that brand because after buying it I regretted having done it

	Feelings towards the brand	I have negative feelings towards that brand
	Relationship reconciliation	In the near future, I may buy this brand again

Table 6 Children's brand definition Factor Analysis

	1	2	3
Image of a Coca-Cola billboard	0.79		
Image of a Coca-Cola brochure	0.82		
Image of a Coca-Cola sales promotion	0.85		
Image of a Coca-Cola merchandising	0.86		
Image of a Coca-Cola label		0.69	
Image of the Coca-Cola logo		0.84	
Image of the red Coca-Cola color		0.75	
Image of a Coca-Cola bottle		0.79	
Image of the Coca-Cola bears		0.76	
Brands help you identify high quality products			0.71
Brands help you identify original products			0.86
Brands help you identify products that are different			0.71
Eigenvalue	3.90	2.41	2.02
Total explained variance	33%	53%	69%
Cronbach's α	0.87	0.83	0.76
Mean of the construct	2.36	2.38	2.02
Standard deviation	0.85	0.98	0.83

Table 7 Brand Morality Factor Analysis

	1	2
Make you look better	0.82	
Help you identify high quality products	0.72	
Help the least fortunate	0.83	
Sell products that help us in our lives	0.78	
Put a lot of advertising everywhere		0.75
Sell harmful products		0.86
Make us buy things we don't really need		0.90
Eigenvalue	3.25	1.58
Total explained variance	46%	69%
Cronbach's α	0.80	0.79
Mean of the construct	1.86	4.23
Standard deviation	0.76	0.76

Table 8 Characteristics of children's brand relationships Factor Analysis

	1
That brand lets me do whatever I want without asking my parents	0.74
That brand lets me spent time with my family	0.93
That brand lets me spent time with my friends	0.91
That brand lets me do fun things with my parents	0.89
That brand lets me teach adults how to use certain products	0.76
That brand lets me be a trendsetter	0.82
That brand lets me remember my best friend	0.86
That brand is also used by my friends	0.87
That brand lets me do my homework fast and easy	0.70
That brand lets me play and not feel alone	0.81
I didn't choose that brands, but my parents bought it for me	-0.67
My friends don't like that brand	-0.84
That brand makes my parents or siblings do not pay attention to me	-0.75
That brand has a bad performance	-0.86
Eigenvalue	9.38
Total explained variance	67%
Cronbach's α	0.96

Table 9 Children's brand relationship break-ups Factor Analysis

	1
I stopped using that brand because my parents no longer wanted to buy it	0.67
I stopped using that brand because I no longer need it	0.879
I stopped using that brand because now I use a brand that is better	0.791
I stopped using that brand because it did not do what I expected it to do	-0.835
I stopped using that brand because after buying it I regretted having done it	-0.895
Eigenvalue	3.34
Total explained variance	67%
Cronbach's α	0.89