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## **Children and Their Brand Relationships**

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT** - In this article, we explore children's socialization into consumer-brand relationships. In order to understand young children's brand consumption, we interviewed twenty parent-child dyads, comprised of ten children aged six- to seven-years old, ten children aged nine- to ten-years old, and twenty parents, recruited through a snowball sample strategy. Four relationship styles emerged from the data: uberbrand relationships, lifestyle relationships, fad relationships, and phase relationships. These four brand relationship patterns are distinct from one another along three key properties: duration, marketer involvement, and interdependence on the brand (i.e., the ways that the brand intertwines with children's lives in everyday usage). Subsequently, we propose a research agenda that poses basic questions about children's brand relationship quality and about the brand-related meanings and consumer practices that develop over childhood.

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# Children and Their Brand Relationships

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore children's socialization into consumer-brand relationships. In order to understand young children's brand consumption, we interviewed twenty parent-child dyads, comprised of ten children aged six- to seven-years old, ten children aged nine- to ten-years old, and twenty parents, recruited through a snowball sample strategy. Four relationship styles emerged from the data: uberbrand relationships, lifestyle relationships, fad relationships, and phase relationships. These four brand relationship patterns are distinct from one another along three key properties: duration, marketer involvement, and interdependence on the brand (i.e., the ways that the brand intertwines with children's lives in everyday usage). Subsequently, we propose a research agenda that poses basic questions about children's brand relationship quality and about the brand-related meanings and consumer practices that develop over childhood.

Understanding whether children form and maintain consumer-brand relationships is critical in order to understand the ways that brands—as culturally shared and personal meanings—peers, and parents socialize children into various meanings and practices associated with consumer culture, influencing their consumption in later years. First, we review relevant literature on children's socialization. We argue that children as young as five or six may act as viable relationship partners. Prior research also suggests that children have the faculty to participate in brand relationships (Ji 2002). Ji (2002) proposes that children form brand relationships derived from her research consisting of five hour-long individual and group interviews with three children from the same middle-class family. Children's participation in consumer-brand relationships was evinced in Ji's (2002) study by children's recall of brand names and past interactions with brands. Yet, Ji's (2002) definition does not fully capture the critical interdependence and intimacy aspects of brand relationships (see Fournier 1998, p. 365).

Twenty parent-child dyads were interviewed, comprised of ten children aged six- to seven-years old, ten children aged nine- to ten-years old, and twenty parents, recruited through a snowball sample strategy, allowing the researchers to access cliques and study peer influence. Parents were given a full explanation of the nature and purpose of the interview before consenting. In many families, siblings were also briefly interviewed allowing us additional insights into brands as socialization agents, and enhancing knowledge about the family's consumption patterns. Theoretical sampling was employed to maintain an equal gender ratio among the child participants and ensure equal numbers of participants within each age group. Families were from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds on the basis of observation of their homes and the brands and circumstances discussed in the interview.

Four relationship styles emerged from the data: uberbrand relationships, lifestyle relationships, fad relationships, and phase relationships. The four children's brand relationship patterns we describe are distinct from one another along three key properties: duration, marketer involvement, and interdependence on the brand (i.e., the ways that the brand intertwines with children's lives in everyday usage).

The uberbrand is an enduring brand relationship style that is highly passionate and grounded in many tangible connections between the child consumer and the brand. Children demonstrate

strong commitment to the brand by collecting multiple brand extensions, strengthening their relationship by increasing the diversity of brand interactions. Marketers, with heavy promotional activities, often initiate uberbrand relationships. While uberbrand relationships show that children accumulate various brand extensions under the common category of the brand, informants displaying lifestyle brand relationships collect different brands and participate in activities with common meanings across product and activity categories. Children, to support an enduring hobby or pastime, engage in multiple brand relationships, with similar meanings across brands. Marketer influence on the brand relationships may be variable dependent on the hobby or lifestyle. Older children's identity projects may also be tangibilized through these brand related activities. Fad relationships are intense but short-lived phenomena, buttressed by heavy promotional efforts; they disappear as rapidly as they arrived (usually a few months). Fads are characterized by children's short-lived passion for the brand, and their length of brand commitment is dependent on constant support from marketers and peers' influences. Phases are brand relationships defined by longer-term commitment and high passion for the brand. However, phases are distinguished from fads by a child's individual pull towards a brand, attracted by its perceived characteristics, compared to a fad's push by marketing activity. Phases are also more enduring than fads, for the relationship does not solely rely on marketing support or the encouragement of peers.

The goals of future brand-related socialization research may provide insights into (a) the structure of children's brand relationships, that is, the kind of relationships young consumers have, (b) the interactive, social processes involved in forming, maintaining, and dissolving children's consumer-brand relationships, and (c) the impact of diverse socialization agents on children's consumer-brand relationships. Further, research may endeavor to discover how pervasive and significant a role brands play in socializing children to the marketplace.

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