

**From Lego Nexo Knight to My Little Pony:
Compiling Birthday Wish Lists in Order to Explore Five-
to Seven-Year-Old Children's Brand Knowledge and
Relationships with Brands**

Master Thesis

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1. Abstract

The present study investigates children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands. As previous research has focused mainly on children who are eight years old and older, the present study focuses on children in the preoperational stage between five and seven years old. Extending a frequently used method to investigate a child's brand awareness, I compiled wish lists with the participants for their birthday while conducting in-depth interviews. This method provided an indication of the children's brand awareness and ability to recall brands, while at the same forming the basis for the exploration of children's brand knowledge, their relationships with brands and other brand-related issues. Findings suggest that children between five and seven years old have a decent level of brand awareness and are able to recall brands that they have been confronted with in the past. Associations they have with the requested brands are varied, with non-product related attributes being mentioned by several of the participating children. Children in the preoperational stage do not yet appear to understand brand symbolism and do not yet appear to form self-brand connections with brands in order to express their self-identity. Children nowadays appear to be confronted with brands and advertising messages on multiple brand platforms, including brand-based movies on Netflix and brand-based games and videos on electronic devices such as iPads. Based on these findings I have developed propositions as well as suggestions for future research. Implications of these findings for managers, practice and society as well as limitations of the present study will be discussed.

Key words: Children, Preoperational stage, Brand knowledge, Brand awareness, Brand recall, Brand associations, Brand symbolism, Self-brand connections

2. Introduction

“(...) he refused to take the food with that [spoon] because (...) it was from Ikea and we also have a spoon from Hema (...) so he did manage to recognize that these two spoons were (...) very different retail brands and he said then that he didn’t want to take the Ikea spoon because that’s far away while Hema is in our village (...)” (mother of a five-year-old boy, #29).

As illustrated by the opening quote, brands have a large impact on various aspects of people’s everyday life. In addition to extensive research on the effects of brands on adults, the impact of brands on children has attracted increasing interest among academics over the years. A brand can be operationalized as *‘the totality of perceptions and feelings that consumers have about any item identified by a brand name’* (Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012, p. 1).

Investigating children’s brand knowledge and their relationships with brands is of interest as children represent three markets combined into one (McNeal, 1992). First, children represent an important primary market. Nowadays, children from western countries have money in the form of savings and allowances and can, from a relatively early age on, decide themselves on what they want to spend that money. Furthermore, children represent an important secondary market of influencers (McNeal, 1992; John, 1999). They considerably influence the purchases of their parents, not just in terms of everyday items such as food and toys, but they also influence decision-making processes regarding items such as cars, vacations and furniture (John, 1999). Additionally, children represent an important future market consisting of potential adult consumers. Research has shown that children develop brand loyalty when they are young, and positive brand attitudes are likely to remain once children have grown into adults (McNeal, 1992).

Various studies have investigated the emergence of consumer behavior in children during early childhood (Haynes, Burts, Dukes & Cloud, 1993; McAlister and Cornwell, 2010). Being aware of brands that surround them is an important aspect of children’s emerging consumer behavior. Children as young as three years old have demonstrated levels of brand awareness (Arnas et al., 2016; Preston, 2016; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). An interesting and commonly used method to investigate children’s brand awareness and brand recall is to analyze letters they have written to Santa requesting Christmas presents (Otnes, Kim & Kim, 1994a; Otnes, Kim & Kim, 1994b; Downs, 1983; O’Cass & Clarke, 2001; Richardson & Simpson, 1982). This method allows children to freely write down any brand they desire without restrictions, providing an adequate overview of the brands they have a

preference for and the brands that play an important role in their lives at a specific point in time.

The studies applying this method however have focused purely on the letters that children wrote to Santa, analyzing the brands and the number of brands mentioned in the letters. Because the letters were collected from local post offices or retailers, the researchers did not have access to the children who authored the letters. Questions regarding the reasoning behind a specific request or associations children had with the brands they mentioned in their letters were not investigated into further detail. The aim of the present study is therefore to extend this research by conducting in-depth interviews while children are compiling a wish list containing gift requests. Conducting such interviews allows the exploration of children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands, as well as other brand-related issues.

The present study focuses on children between five and seven years old. Following Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (John, 1999), at this age children are in the *preoperational stage*. The *preoperational stage*, which includes children between three and seven years old, is one of the most relevant stages when exploring the development of brand symbolism in children (McAlister and Cornwell, 2010). During the *preoperational stage* children start to be able to recognize brand names and link them to product categories and display an emerging understanding of the symbolic meaning of brands (John, 1999). The *preoperational stage* can be divided into two subcategories (Stutts & Honeycutt, 1987; Neeley & Schumann, 2004). The second category is of interest for the present study. It is called *intuitive thought* and starts after children have turned four years old. In this sub-phase, children start to display the ability to categorize products based on similarities and differences as well as the ability to compare brands based on certain attributes (Neeley & Schumann, 2004). As the ability to differentiate between products as well as the ability to compare brands is important when exploring children's relationships with brands, this study focuses on five to seven year old children in the second phase of the *preoperational stage*.

Conducting exploratory research, analyzing children's gift requests and conducting in-depth interviews allows the development of a more detailed understanding of children's brand knowledge, including brand awareness and brand associations, and their relationships with brands, including brand symbolism and self-brand connections. This leads to the following research question:

To what extent do five- to seven-year-old children develop brand knowledge and relationships with brands and what are the key drivers behind these relationships?

Insights gained from this study could be interesting for academics and practitioners alike. As children are the consumers of tomorrow, understanding children's brand knowledge, their relationships with brands and how they learn about the existence of particular brands can provide interesting insights for practitioners. These insights are relevant for practitioners because of their responsibility towards society to not target children directly with their marketing efforts. Acting accordingly can help prevent image damage. Being viewed as a brand that aims their marketing efforts at children could have negative consequences for a brand's image, especially in a time in which it is more and more frowned upon to target children directly.

This is the first study to investigate letters with children's gift requests into further detail by conducting in-depth interviews. The results could provide academics with more comprehensive knowledge about what goes on in the minds of children. This knowledge could help to further understand children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands and provide insights that are relevant for academic literature, both in the field of marketing and psychology. Insights gained from this exploratory study could form the basis for future research.

In the following sections I review relevant literature on children's brand knowledge and on constructs linked to children's relationships with brands. After that I will introduce the research setting and discuss the method applied in this study in detail. In section 5 I will present notable findings and in section 6 I will discuss the presents study and suggest propositions based on the findings as well as avenues for future research. This paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications and limitations of the present study.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Stages of Cognitive Development

Exploring children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands requires an understanding of the stages of cognitive development they go through from early childhood to adolescence. Though children show awareness of brands as early as three years old (Arnas et al., 2016; Preston, 2016; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010), they view the world and their surroundings differently than adults and adolescents. A substantial amount of studies investigating children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands as well as related constructs refer to the traditional Theory of Cognitive Development by Piaget (Belk, Mayer & Driscoll, 1984; John, 1999; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010; Mizerski, 2010; Arna et al., 2016).

The Theory of Cognitive Development proposes that there are four developmental stages (McAlister and Cornwell, 2010). The *sensorimotor stage*, which is between birth and two years of age, includes coordination of sensory perceptions and basic motor functions. During this stage, infants slowly start to develop an awareness of an outside world.

Next is the *preoperational stage*, which is when children are between 3 and 7 years old. In this stage, children start to use words and gestures, but they do not yet fully understand the difference between their own views and those of others. They display an emerging ability to recognize brand names and associate them with product categories (John, 1999). During the second part of this phase, the *intuitive thought* phase, which starts once children have turned four years old, they begin to be able to put products into categories based on perceived similarity (Stutts & Hunnicutt, 1987; Neeley & Schumann, 2004). Additionally, children in the preoperational stage start to begin to understand brand symbolism (John, 1999).

In the *concrete operation stage*, when children are between seven and eleven years old, they begin to use mental operations that enables them to order, combine, separate and transform actions and objects. The last stage is the *formal operational stage*. Adolescents between 11 and 19 years old are able to think methodically and analytically and apply logical reasoning.

The present research focuses on children in the *preoperational stage*. Children between five and seven years old, who have already entered the *intuitive phase*, the second phase of the *preoperational stage*, participated in the present study in order to explore their brand knowledge and relationships with brands as well as other brand-related issues.

3.2. Brand Knowledge

An individual's brand knowledge determines what he or she thinks of when confronted with a brand or an advertising message about that brand (Keller, 1993). An individual's brand knowledge can be defined as "*the personal meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory, that is, all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information*" (Keller, 2003, p. 596). Brand knowledge is represented in an individual's memory as a node that is connected to various associations. Brand knowledge can be divided into two dimensions, which are an individual's brand awareness and brand associations (Keller, 1993). In the following sections I will discuss brand awareness and brand associations of children into further detail.

3.2.1. Brand Awareness

Children in the preoperational stage appear to be increasingly aware of the brands that surround them (Arnas et al., 2016; Preston, 2016; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). Branded products are presented in stores, featured on television and can be found in almost every household (John, 1999). Considering the amount of advertisements adults and children are confronted with on a daily basis, children frequently come in contact with various brands, both relevant and irrelevant to their age group. Brand awareness can be defined as '*one's active and passive knowledge of a particular brand*' (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005, p.457). Brand awareness exists among children as young as three years old (Arnas et al., 2016). Children's brand awareness appears to develop first for products that are targeted at children, such as toys (Otnes, Kim and Kim, 1994). Awareness of brands aimed at adults develops when children are older and these brands start to play a more relevant role in their lives (John, 1999). Otnes et al. (1994) analyzed letters written by children to Santa in an attempt to gain insights into children's understanding of material goods. They refer to previous research that indicates that children stop believing in Santa around the age of eight, implicitly indicating that the children participating in their research are younger than eight years old. In the study, 50% of the gifts requested in the letters were mentioned specifically by brand name. Around 85% out of the 344 children included mentioned at least one brand in their letters with gift requests to Santa. Children thus frequently ask for items by brand name, suggesting a substantial level of brand awareness.

Television is an important medium through which children are confronted with brands. Children's brand awareness is positively influenced by exposure to television (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). By the time they turn five, children are able to distinguish commercials from other television programs (John, 1999). Even three-year-old children have

demonstrated the ability to identify commercials featured on television (Preston, 2016). As brands play a main role in a large amount of commercials, children's ability to distinguish commercials from regular television programs is an important indicator of brand awareness.

3.2.1.1. Brand Recall

Children's ability to recall brands from memory is an important dimension of brand awareness (Keller, 1993; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). Brand recall can be defined as *'consumers' ability to retrieve the brand when given the product category, the needs fulfilled by the category, or some other type of probe as a cue'* (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Preschool-aged children between three and five years old are able to recall brand names after being confronted with them on television or on product packaging (John, 1999). Visual cues play a vital role in children's ability to recall brands. When brand names are accompanied by visual cues, children between three and five years old can better remember them, indicating that visual cues, such as images, colors or characters, are important when it comes to the encoding and retrieving of significant product information (Macklin, 1996). With the support of visual retrieval cues, pre-school children between four and six years old are better at recalling the brand name, have more positive brand evaluations and are more likely *"to ask mom to buy the brand"* (Macklin, 1994, p. 306).

3.2.2. Brand Associations

Brand associations are an important dimension of brand knowledge (Keller, 1993). Brand associations reflect the knowledge consumers link with a particular brand (Aaker, 1991) as well as what brands mean to them (Keller, 1993). Brand associations can be grouped into three categories, depending on the amount of information incorporated in the association (Keller, 1993). The three categories are attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes *'are those descriptive features that characterize a product or service – what a consumer thinks the product or service is or has and what is involved with its purchase or consumption'* (Keller, 1993, p. 4). Brand benefits refer the value and meaning these attributes represent for consumers. Brand attitudes can be defined as *'consumers' overall evaluations of a brand'* (Keller, 1993, p. 4). Examining brand associations can provide information as to which aspects of associations – attributes, benefits or attitudes (Keller, 1993) – are important to children in the preoperational stage between five and seven years old. Brand attributes, benefits and brand attitudes will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

3.2.2.1. Brand Attributes

Brand attributes can be divided into product-related attributes and non-product related attributes (Keller, 1993). Product-related attributes comprise the physical characteristics of a product. Non-product related attributes include attributes such as the price of a product or the type of people who uses the product. Attributes play an important role in the consumer knowledge of children in the preoperational stage. Children in this stage are likely to make choices based on perceptual attributes (John, 1999). When children between four and ten years old are tasked with categorizing items, they use perceptual attributes such as the shape, color and characteristics of the packaging, whereas older children use more underlying attributes of the products (John & Sujana, 1990).

3.2.2.2. Brand Benefits

Brand benefits can be further divided into three groups. Functional benefits “*are the more intrinsic advantages of product or service consumption*” (Keller, 1993, p.4) and can often be linked to product-related attributes. Experiential benefits involve the feeling of using a product or service, whereas symbolic benefits usually refer to extrinsic benefits and “*relate to underlying needs for social approval or personal expression and outer-directed self-esteem*” (Keller, 1993, p.4). Symbolic benefits are an important part of the present study and will be discussed into further detail under section 3.3.1 Brand Symbolism.

3.2.2.3. Brand Attitudes

Examining children’s brand attitudes is important as brand attitudes can be the starting point for various consumer behaviors including brand choice (Keller, 1993). Being confronted with a vast amount of branded products on a daily basis, children are likely to start developing preferences and favorable attitudes for particular brands at a young age. During middle and late childhood, children start to favor certain brands over others, even when the products do not differ to a great extent (John, 1999). In pre-school, children start to show a liking for branded products, which increases even more during their time in elementary school.

Brand or licensed characters play a significant role in children’s attitudes towards brands or products (Haynes et al., 1993; Mizerski, 1995; Neeley & Schumann, 2004; De Droog, Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2011; Danovitch & Mills, 2014). Three- and four-year-olds have demonstrated a preference for licensed characters such as Ninja Turtles and Barbie on their clothing (Haynes et al. 1993). Characters can also have a positive impact on children’s attitude towards food, increasing children’s preference for and request intent for healthy

snacks (De Droog, Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2011). Furthermore, four-year-olds have demonstrated a preference for products associated with familiar characters, such as Dora the Explorer or Nemo, over products that were not linked to a character, even when the product associated with a familiar character was of lower quality (Danovitch & Mills, 2014).

3.3. Children's Relationships with Brands

In addition to understanding children's brand knowledge and thus having an indication of children's brand awareness and brand associations, it is interesting to go one step further and explore why they connect with and prefer certain brands over others. In order to explore children's relationships with brands, this study focuses on two specific constructs: brand symbolism and self-brand connections. These constructs could provide interesting insights into aspects of children's relationships with brands, such the key drivers behind the development of these relationships. Exploring children's ability to understand the symbolic meaning of brands could help us understand what brands mean or represent to them. Furthermore, looking into self-brand connections can lead to vital insights into children's relationships with brands as well. Examining the extent to which children use brands to define and express their self-identity could help in exploring key drivers of their relationships with particular brands into greater detail.

3.3.1. Brand Symbolism

Previous research has established that children start to become aware of brands from an early age on. The question remains however if they understand the meaning associated with the specific brands they encounter. Previous research has indicated the emergence of brand symbolism in young children (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010; Belk et al., 1984; Achenreiner & John, 2003; Watkins et al., 2016). Brand symbolism can be defined "*as an understanding of the meaning attributed to a brand name. It includes an appreciation of the ways in which a brand name symbolizes user qualities (e.g., popularity, user image) as well as information about the products or services encompassed by the brand (e.g., perceptions of brand use)*" (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010, p. 204). Children are believed to develop an understanding of brand symbolism over time when they become aware of the social meanings attached to particular brands (Achenreiner & John, 2003).

Children's ability to understand brand symbolism can be examined using *Theory of Mind* as a possible predictor. *Theory of Mind* is an indicator of social development (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). Children who have developed *Theory of Mind* do not only consider their own mental states, but also those of the people around them. Being able to consider the thoughts and feelings of other people can result '*in a heightened awareness of the ways in which brands can be used as symbols in a social world (e.g., to represent status, popularity, quality)*' (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010, p. 223).

Brands can be used to draw inferences about other people based on, for example, the clothes or shoes they choose to wear. As children's consumer knowledge in the preoperational stage is primarily based on perceptual features and single attributes of products and complicated cognitive processes are limited, it is unlikely that children between five and seven years old use brands to make assumptions about other people. Eight-year-olds slowly begin to make assumptions about people based on the products they own and use and fully display these assumptions by the time they are eleven or twelve (Belk et al, 1984). By the time they turn twelve years old they display consumer judgments based on brand names (Achenreiner & John, 2003).

Children seem to begin to comprehend consumption symbolism when they reach seven or eight years of age and this understanding of consumption symbolism is fully developed around the age of 12. However, children between three and five years old have demonstrated an emerging ability to comprehend brand symbolism, indicating that children with a well-developed *Theory of Mind* are quicker in understanding the symbolic meaning of brands (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010).

3.3.2. Self-Brand Connections

Individuals build relationships with or associate themselves with brands for different reasons. Brands can assist individuals in building and expressing their self-identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Individuals can identify themselves with products or brands they own and use these products or brands to define their self-concept (Belk, 1988). Furthermore, through their choices of brands and products, individuals can present themselves to others as these brand choices reflect the '*congruency between brand image and self-image*' (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, p. 340). Matching characteristics of a brand to their self-concept, individuals create a bridge between a particular brand and their representation of self, known as self-brand connections (Chaplin & John, 2005). Little research has focused on self-brand connections in children. Why do children consider brands to be important and prefer certain

brands to others? Self-brand connections are created between middle childhood and early adolescence and increase both in number and in depth with age (Chaplin & John, 2005). Seven- and eight-year-olds' self-brand connections are based more on specific brand associations, such as owning a branded product, whereas young adolescents base their self-brand connections more on the personality connected to the brand, user characteristics or reference group associations.

4. Method

4.1. Introduction

In order to gain insights into children's relationships with brands, the participants were asked which items they would like to have for their birthday in order to create a wish list. These wish lists provided the basis for in-depth interviews, which were held while the wish lists were being compiled. In-depth interviews were conducted in order to provide the participants the opportunity to elaborate on their answers and to describe personal experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). They were held in order to further explore children's brand knowledge, their relationships with brands and other brand-related issues. In addition, in-depth interviews were held with one or both parents of the participants in order to gain further insights based on their unique perspective on their children's brand knowledge and relationships with brands as well insights into their own attitude towards brands.

4.2. Sample

In the study, 22 children between five and seven years old created wish lists and participated in in-depth interviews. The average age of the children was 5.86 years and 59.09 % of the participants were boys. In the study, 86.36% of the participants had one or more siblings. Furthermore, for each child that participated, one or both parents were interviewed in order to gain additional insights into their children's brand knowledge and relationships with brands. In the study, five pairs of siblings participated. In these cases parents were only interviewed once, resulting in 19 interviews with parents. In total, 41 interviews were held between April 26th and May 15th 2017.

I used snowball sampling to gather my respondents. Most of the respondents lived in the one neighborhood with a lot of families with young children. Acquaintances of mine, whose two five-year-old children participated in the research, contacted their friends and neighbors with children in the required age category and asked them if I could reach out to them. If this was the case, I received their contact details and set up a meeting for in-depth interviews. In turn, these families also helped me to reach additional families with children who qualified to participate in this study.

The resulting 22 wish lists contained 56 gift requests in total. On average, the wish lists contained 2.54 branded items. Of these 56 gift requests, 25 were for specific branded items, which equals 44.64%. Out of all the children creating a wish list, 17 out of 22 mentioned at least one item specifically by brand name.

4.3. Data Collection

In order to make the participating children feel more comfortable, the interviews were conducted at their home in a familiar surrounding. Confidentiality of the interviews was guaranteed to the parents before the interview was conducted. Previous research analyzed letters children wrote to Santa containing gift requests (Otnes, Kim & Kim, 1994; Downs, 1983; O’Cass & Clarke, 2001; Richardson & Simpson, 1982). These studies either collected letters from local post offices during or right after the Christmas period (Richardson & Simpson, 1982; Otnes et al., 1994) or from a national retailer (O’Cass & Clarke, 2001). Another study asked a teacher to task her students with writing a letter to Santa in the first week of December requesting any gifts they wanted (Downs, 1983). However, writing letters to Santa is not such a widespread tradition in the Netherlands. An alternative could have been to write letters to Sinterklaas, but as the study was conducted in April and May, the children who participated in the study were asked to compile a wish list requesting presents for their birthday instead. I wrote these requests down, creating a wish list for each participant.

These wish lists provided an indication of the brands that the children are aware of and that they like as well as of their ability to recall these brands. Furthermore, it created the opportunity to discuss additional brand-related issues. While we compiled the wish lists with the gift requests, in-depth interviews were held. An interview guide was created in order to achieve a high level of consistency among the interviews, which, as a result, positively impacted the reliability of the findings. The exercise for the children and the interview questions for both the children and the parents were pre-tested using a convenience sample.

The interviews with both the children and the parents covered the topics discussed in the literature review: Children’s brand knowledge including (1) brand awareness and (2) brand associations, and children’s relationships with brands including (3) brand symbolism and (4) self-brand connections. In addition, children were asked to elaborate on why they liked the brands they requested as well as on how they came into contact with the brands in question. The parents’ interview guides also included questions regarding their own attitude towards brands as well as questions regarding their opinion as to where their children learned about the requested brands.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in Dutch. The interviews with the children were held in the presence of one or both parents in order to help the children feel more comfortable. The parents were asked not to interfere in the interviews and the majority of the time the children were focused on me and not on their parents. The presence of a parent was useful at times as the parents occasionally encouraged the child to speak more and provide

more details, without influencing them or telling them what to say. The questions included in the interview guide were discussed with the child for each brand mentioned for the wish list. After the interview with the child, one or both parents were interviewed.

I recorded all the interviews after having received permission to do so. The length of the interviews with the children ranged from 3:15 minutes to 21:55 minutes, averaging 9:49 minutes per interview. The lengths of the interviews with the parents ranged from 6:14 minutes to 26:05 minutes, averaging 12:04 minutes per interview. Afterwards the interviews were transcribed and copies of the transcripts of the interviews were provided to the parents if they had indicated that they would appreciate that.

4.4. Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was employed to code and analyze the transcripts (Spiggle, 1994). This method allows the direct comparison of the transcripts, making it possible to explore similarities and differences found in the data. First, the transcripts were split into two groups, with the transcripts of the children's interviews being coded separately from those of the parents. Second, the transcripts were carefully analyzed in order to discover patterns in the data. I compared incidents in the data among the transcripts and developed codes for these incidents. These codes coincided to a great extent with the main topics discussed in the literature review. Additionally, the interviews lead to interesting findings that were not covered in the literature review, but that occurred naturally during the interview process. Codes were created for these additional findings as well. Once the different categories with corresponding codes were established, subsequent incidents in the transcripts were compared with these categories and coded accordingly. Once the entirety of the transcripts was coded, I went through them twice more to ensure that the coding was applied consistently throughout the transcripts. After the categories were established and coded accordingly, I carefully analyzed the transcripts in order to discover patterns and interesting insights.

4.5. Research Ethics

As the present study included young children, carefully considering research ethics was crucial. The parents of the participating children were informed regarding the nature and the purpose of the study and the content of the exercise and the interviews. The study was very briefly and simply explained to the participating children. Anonymity was guaranteed and the parents were informed that they and the children would not be mentioned by name in the paper nor that any other identifiable characteristics would be included in the analysis. Copies

of the transcripts and the master thesis will be provided if the parents express an interest after the interviews were conducted. I have tried to make the children feel as comfortable as possible during the study, making sure to have spent time with them beforehand to give them the opportunity to become familiar with me. Furthermore, I have done everything I could to limit my influence on the interview process, having done my best not to guide or lead the participants in their answers. The children participating in the research did so on a voluntary basis. Even if the parents had previously agreed to the research, if the child did not want to participate he or she did not have to so of course. The children were informed that there were no wrong answers and that all their answers would be helpful and interesting. Furthermore, I told them that the interviews could be paused at any time for any reason, and that the children could stop the interview whenever they wanted to. The aim of the present study is to gain deeper understanding of children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands, but findings are not to be misused in any capacity in order to target marketing efforts at children directly.

5. Results

5.1 Brand Knowledge

5.1.1. Brand Awareness

Out of the 22 children that participated in the research, 17 mentioned at least one brand by name when compiling their wish lists, indicating a decent level of brand awareness. The majority of the brands the children mentioned during the interviews were brands specifically aimed at children. Only three children mentioned more adult-oriented brands. A seven-year-old boy discussed Nike and Adidas and two five-year-old boys brought up the retail brands Action and Plus, respectively.

There were a few brands that the children appeared to be particularly aware of. A brand that appears to be very salient in the both the boys' and girls' minds was Lego (10). Some of them also appeared to be very aware of the different sub brands of Lego, mentioning various types that they would like to have (5).

“Lego City and Lego Nexo Knight” (m, 7, #37¹).

“But I also have Lego Speed, Lego Star Wars, Lego Ninjago” (m, 6, #6).

“Eh Lego Friends I already have two little figures from it (...)” (f, 5, #1).

Children between five and seven years old also appear to be aware of retail brands, naming for example toy stores or supermarkets specifically by name when discussing where they saw a particular brand or got a particular item.

“Yes from Action” (m, 5, discussing items he got at Action, #28)

“(...) there was a high speed train at Intertoys and you could play with it” (m, 7, discussing where he saw a product that he liked, #31)

Although more than 2/3 of the children mentioned at least one product by brand name, most parents indicated that their children do not have a high level of brand awareness. Out of the 19 parents that were interviewed, 13 seemed to agree that their children are not aware of specific brands that surround them. Of these 13 parents, four indicated that their child was not aware of brands at all.

¹ A list of the respondents, including characteristics such as age and gender, can be found in the Appendix. The number included at the end of every quote indicates the respondent number of the person who is being quoted.

“Not at all” (f, mother of five-year-old twin boys (#33 and #34), #36).

Four other parents indicated that they do not think their children are really aware of brands yet, but that they do recognize certain brands or their packaging after having seen a product from that brand.

“I don’t think so yet. Yes of course because they know it, look once you’ve had something from Lego than that is very recognizable thing” (mother of a six-year-old boy, #32)

Six of the 19 parents who participated in the interviews indicated that their kids are starting to show an emerging awareness of brands.

“Eh the seven-year-old more than the five-year-old (...) and eh yes if you eh if you view dolls and those things really as brands than yes than you also see an awareness of brands in the five-year-old” (father of a five-year-old girl and seven-year-old boy, #10).

“I think for his age he’s pretty pretty brand aware and he also knows what a brand is or kind of knows that there is such a thing as a brand which we didn’t I didn’t think we really explained to him” (mother of a five-year-old boy, #29).

Considering the number of brands mentioned by the children, they appear to be aware of brands to some extent. In their parents’ opinion however, the majority of the children is not yet aware of brands that surround them. Furthermore, there appears to be variation even within the age groups, as parents of a few five-year-olds have indicated that their children are starting to become aware of brands, whereas other parents in the same age group are of the opinion that their children are too young to be aware of brands at all.

Although parents indicated that their children do not seem to be very aware of brands, in their opinion there is a strong link between their children’s brand awareness and them watching television and commercials (12). Parents indicated that television and commercials lead to the children requesting certain products that they see on the screen, although it appears that most of the children focus more on the specific item in question rather than on the brand. They also explained that even though the children might request a specific product after having seen it on TV, they tend to forget about it quickly and do not insist of having it afterwards.

“(...) sometimes then it is really on a Saturday and very many commercials and stuff and eh then eh I do notice ‘Ooooh I want this one and I want that one’ but they also forget about it at some point” (mother of a seven-year-old boy, #14).

“Yes al the commercial messages yes yes yes...yes everything yes I want that I want that I want that” (mother of a six-year-old boy, #19).

“When we drive past McDonalds they want to go there even though they have never been there. They know that from the commercials and that that makes curious” (mother of six- and seven-year-old boys, #39).

The children themselves also indicated that they have seen many of the brands they mentioned during the interviews on TV (9).

“Ehm on TV and after that I was a total fan of it” (f, 5, explaining how she learned about My Little Pony, #1).

5.1.1.1. Brand Recall

As 17 out of the 22 participating children mentioned at least one brand name during the interview, this indicates that most of them are able to recall a brand after having been confronted with it in the past. However, there were also four children who requested a specific item, but even after thinking about it could not retrieve the brand name. For example, a six-year-old boy mentioned various items that he would like to have but did not mention a specific brand name. After it became apparent that he would not recall the brand name unaided, his mother asked him if he was talking about Lego. Only then did he realize he was discussing Lego, even though it appeared that he played a lot with it. Two other children requested an item that they could not name specifically by brand.

“A thing that you can put around your arm like this and then you can play games on it but I don’t know what it is called” (f, 7, discussing an item for her wish list, #24).

“I don’t know what it’s called. A a bird an owl that repeats what you say” (f, 6, discussing an item for her wish list, #20).

Apart from the abovementioned cases, most children between five and seven years old appear to be able to recall a brand name that they have seen in one form or another. Their ability to recall brand names appears to be greater for a brand that they are familiar with and that they already have a product from. Many of the kids who recalled a specific brand indicated that they already own items from that particular brand and now want another one. Brand names of products in a new category might be a little more difficult to recall.

5.1.2. Brand Associations

In order to find out what specific associations children have with a brand, we discussed what thoughts they had when playing with a specific brand. Half of the children who participated in the study were able to formulate associations that they had with the brand they requested (11). The children did not appear to have a lot of associations with these brands. Of those children, five expressed two associations they had with one brand. The other six children expressed only one association per brand. The associations mentioned by the kids were very varied. Using the definition of Keller (1993), a part of the associations can be structured in terms of attributes, benefits and attitudes.

5.1.2.1. Attributes

Children between five and seven years old do not appear to have many associations in terms of product-related attributes. Two boys indicated that they had associations linked to specific product-related attributes of a brand. Discussing playing with Lego, it appears children might also associate what they should be careful for with a product.

“Not losing any bricks” (m, 6, Lego, #6)

“Ehm so I don’t lose those things for example someone else puts in another thing for example and I don’t know puts it outside or something” (m, 6, Lego, #40).

Non-product related attributes were the associations mentioned most frequently by the participating children. Children appear to make a distinction between brands based on the users of these brands. They distinguished between brands for boys and brands for girls, suggesting that they associate certain brands with gender (4).

“Ehm girls not, boys yes” (m, 7, explaining who would like Lego. #37)

“Because they are boys (...) Girls are a little in between my sister has two things from Lego and I have a lot more” (m, 6, explaining why his friends would like Lego, #6).

“They are not all girls but also boys” (f, 5, explaining that her family likes her Frozen castle, #9).

Furthermore, another non-product related attribute children appear to have associations with is pricing information. Although they were discussing general product categories and not a specific brand, a few children made remarks about the price (3).

“Eeehm ... it’s quite expensive. Very expensive. Actually” (m, 7, talking about wanting a cross bike, #13).

“Yes, expensive” (m, 5, talking about a trampoline, #28).

5.1.2.2. Benefits

Children between five and seven years old do not appear to have specific associations with a brand regarding benefits that a brand could provide them. They appear to want a specific branded item because they like to play with it, but not because they expect a more outspoken benefit from its use or from owning it. Only one seven-year-old boy indicated that he wanted a product for a reason that might be interpreted as a benefit. After indicating that he associated the brand Oxboard with one of his best friends, he mentioned that owning that specific product would enable him to someday use it together with that friend who already owns it.

“That I can then maybe ehm later on do it together with my friend” (m, 7, discussing Oxboard, #8).

5.1.2.3. Attitudes

The brand attitudes of the majority of the children in this age category appear to be rather superficial. When asked their attitude towards a brand they requested, nearly everyone responded with ‘nice’ (11) or ‘very nice’ (6). Children between five and seven years old do not yet appear to have a deep emotional attachment with a brand. Rather, it appears that their

brand attitudes are simply based on whether they like a brand or not. Possibly, children in the specified age category have either a positive or negative brand attitude, but do not yet make a deeper distinction in terms of their brand attitudes towards different brands. Only three children expressed a brand attitude other than ‘nice’, indicating that they considered the brand they requested to be ‘cool’. Other than that, the participating children between five and seven years old do not appear to have very outspoken brand attitudes.

“(...) very nice it is super nice” (m, 7, talking about Lego, #37).

“Well because I think it’s beautiful because I think it’s really cool “ (m, 6, discussing a Lego helicopter, #6).

A few parents have indicated that brand characters have a positive effect on their children’s attitudes towards a brand (5), with one parent suggesting that her child prefers a brand with a character to a brand without a brand character.

“Yes if you put a Minion on it than that is attractive” (mother of six- and seven-year-old boys, #39).

“Yes I do think that when it is more child-like often the more expensive brands like Kellogg’s which has a nice little character on it and another brand doesn’t have that yes than she likes that better” (mother of a six-year-old girl, #21).

5.1.2.4. Additional Associations

In addition to the structure created by Keller (1993), the children mentioned various associations that could not be assigned to one of the three categories. As they provide interesting insights, these associations will be discussed below.

Two of the children appeared to have more general associations related to the brand itself and not to a specific category or product.

“Ehm that they have nice things and that they can do that they can do nice things” (f, 5, Lego Friends, #1).

“Soccer. And my favorite teams” (m, 7, Nike, #8).

Some of the kids mentioned associations related to a specific category of the brand (2).

“Just about beautiful cross cars” (m, 6, Hot Wheels, #30)

“Than I think about beautiful trains” (m, 6, Lego, #31).

Other children mentioned associations related to a specific product of the brand (2).

“About that clumsy police station” (m, 7, Lego City, #37)

“That there is a prison included” (m, 5, Lego, #4).

One girl indicated that she associated playing with a particular product with another platform of that same brand.

“Eeeehm about videos of My Little Pony” (f, 5, My Little Pony, #1).

Quite a few indicated that when playing with a branded product they thought about what they could do with it (7).

“About building” (m, 7, Lego, #37)

“About trying to build houses but I don’t always succeed” (m, 6, Lego, #40)

Considering the associations directly or indirectly mentioned by the participating children, it appears that the quite a few of their associations with the brands they requested do not fall under the categories defined by Keller (1993). Associations that children between five and seven years old have appear to be very varied and involve various categories and aspects of a brand.

5.2. Children's Relationships with Brands

5.2.1. Brand Symbolism

The children participating in this study do not yet appear to be aware of the social meaning attributed to a specific brand in terms of for example popularity or image. Discussing what they thought of a particular brand that they mentioned, most of the children simply said 'nice', but the majority did not indicate that they thought of a particular brand to be for example 'cool' or said anything that would indicate that they thought of popularity or image. Only three boys made statements that might be interpreted as a basic form of brand symbolism.

"Because it is cool" (m, 5, when asked why he wanted Lego for his birthday, #4)

"Yes cool" (m, 7, talking about a Lego Nexo Knight, #13).

Similarly, talking about how they felt when they played with or used a specific brand, most of the children simply said 'good' or 'fine', but nothing that would indicate that playing with one brand makes them feel for example 'cooler' than playing with another brand. We talked about other people who would like a specific brand, but the children who answered that question referred to their friends. They did not describe particular characteristics of person who would like the brand in question, indicating that they do not yet appear to consider particular user images yet.

Most of the parents who discussed brand symbolism (13 out of 16) indicated that their children did not yet understand the social meaning attached to a brand or that owning or using a brand could project something about a person.

"Really not at all" (mother of six- and seven-year-old boys, #39).

"No for that he is like I said too young" (mother of a six-year-old boy, #19).

Three parents indicated their child is already aware of brand symbolism or is right on the edge and might start to understand that soon.

“Weeeeeelll that I think maybe that’s already starting a little bit with her I have yeeees yes maybe it’s a little on the edge but I think that that will will start soon...I really think that” (mother of a five-year-old girl, #2).

“Eeeeeeh yes. Yes. He is aware of that (...)” (father of a seven-year-old boy, #10).

The mother of a seven-year old girl described an interesting observation, explaining how her daughter bought Heelys - shoes with little wheels - with money she received for her birthday, insisting the shoes to be ‘real’ Heelys. Although the mother said that her daughter does not yet understand brand symbolism, this could be a first indication that the girl is starting to comprehend the symbolic meaning of brands.

“(...) eh yes we first looked at these fakes they were a whole lot cheaper but that she didn’t like that at all and the real ones yes they are twice as expensive but she was completely sold. So I think in that sense she does see the difference eh ...” (mother of a seven-year-old girl, #23)

Out of 13 parents who were asked the question, 12 parents were very clear in that their children were not making assumptions or judgments about other people based on the brands they owned or played with.

“No. And they also wouldn’t care if a kid for example has fake Lego or real Lego it’s just Lego fun to build with that’s it” (mother of six- and seven-year-old boys, #39).

“She doesn’t do that yet” (mother of a five-year-old girl, #2)

Only one parent indicated that their child might already make comparisons between brands and make judgments based on that. However, these comparisons or judgments seem to focus more on the product itself than on the person who owns or uses it.

“Yes they do see the difference in quality eh in the sense it’s bigger or it breaks down quicker or eh that yes” (mother of six-year-old boy, #19).

An additional interesting insight involving brand symbolism is a parent’s potential willingness to buy branded items for their children in order to protect them from becoming outsiders. As they of course understand brand symbolism, three parents suggested that if it should be the case that the children wanted certain brands in order to fit in, they would likely be willing to go along with that.

“As protection. So that she doesn’t become an outsider” (parents of a five-year-old girl, discussing their willingness to buy brands for their daughter, #2 and #3).

“(…) we have always said that eh because of that [brands] he shouldn’t become an outsider so to say (…)” (mother of a five-year-old boy, #5).

5.2.2. Self-Brand Connections

Children in the five- to- seven-year age category do not yet seem to use brands in order to build and/or express their self-identity or the present themselves to others. I asked the children how they would feel if they would receive one of the items they put on the wish list, with the same capabilities or function, but from a different brand. If they really identified with a specific brand already and considered that brand to be part of their self-identity, they would probably not be satisfied with a comparable item from a different brand. However, for 15 out of the 20 branded items, the children indicated that they would also enjoy the same type of product from a different brand than they had requested.

“That doesn’t matter” (m, 5, #33).

“Yes also still nice” (m, 6, #18).

Of those children who indicated that they would not enjoy a product from a different brand (5), two of them said that they would really want an item from the brand that they had specified because they desired to collect all the items from that specific brand.

“My Little Pony (…) because I ehm already have a lot but I want them I want one from all of them” and *“Because then I have all the little Lego Friends dolls”* (f, 5, #1).

“I only want to collect Lego Nexo Knight” (m, 7, #13).

Three children said that they would not want a comparable item from a different brand than they had asked for, but they could not specifically indicate the reason why.

“Not really super great but just…” (m, 7, explaining how he would feel when receiving a different brand, #8).

“Not nice” (f, 7, discussing her thoughts about receiving a different brand, #22).

Furthermore, I asked the children what someone would think of them when that person sees them play with a specific branded item. This question could give an indication of how they perceive a brand would make them look to others, thus suggesting how they potentially identified with it. However, out of the children who comprehended the question (10), the majority of the children indicated that if someone were to see them with a specific brand, that person would want to play with them or would want to help them, not considering any personal characteristics whatsoever.

“I think I think that that he would also really like to play with it” (f, 5, #16).

“That he is going to play with me” (m, 6, #30).

“Ehm ... that he wants to help me!” (m, 6, #6).

Only three kids mentioned a particular characteristic when asked what a person would think of them when playing with a specific branded item.

“Eeh that sometimes they think that I am nice and sometimes some people think that I am fighting I think I believe” (m, 7, #37).

“Pretty” (f, 5, #9).

Children might have basic forms of self-brand connections and identify with specific brands if it symbolizes a profession they aspire to do when they are older. Three children indicated that they would like a specific branded item for their birthday because it represents the jobs they would like to perform when they are grown up.

“And I want a fire department helicopter because I love the fire department. And I want to become a fireman when I am bigger” (m, 5, talking about Lego helicopters, #33).

“Ehm ... and then I also feel a little bit like a machinist” (m, 6, talking about Lego trains, #31).

Almost all parents indicated that their children do not yet like brands because of what it says about them, suggesting that self-brand connections do not yet play a prominent role in the specified age groups.

“No they are too small for that they don’t do that yet” (mother of six- and seven-year-old boys, #39)

“He absolutely doesn’t think about that I think” (mother of a five-year-old boy, #5).

Only one parent indicated that his son might consider certain brands because of what it says about him. This was highlighted by the fact that during the interview with his father, the boy went upstairs, changed into the Nike tracksuit that he had mentioned during his interview and came back down looking really proud.

“Ehm he ehm... Yes I think so. I think so” (father of a seven-year-old boy, #10).

Another parent raised an interesting aspect when discussing the fact that her son appears to identify with brands that are close to him. Discussing her son’s preference for a Hema spoon to an Ikea spoon, she indicated that her son might identify with a brand because it is present in the village that they live.

“(...) so he kind of identified already with a brand which is in our village as part of him” (mother of a five-year-old boy, #29).

5.3. Additional findings

During the interviews I also gained several interesting insights in addition to the topics covered by the interview questions. These compelling additional insights will be discussed in detail below.

5.3.1. Multiple Brand Platforms

Another interesting finding was that Netflix and YouTube seem to be significant mediums through which children are confronted with brands. Children indicated that they watch a lot of brand-related videos or play brand-related games on electronic devices (6).

“Eh because ehm I eh watch that a lot on the iPad” (f, 5, talking about why she likes My Little Pony. #1).

“Yes on the iPad. From Lego games” (m, 5, talking about where he first saw a specific Lego product, #33).

Parents also indicated that their children watch a lot of videos on Netflix and YouTube and play games on electronic devices such as iPads (11). Child-oriented brands appear to use multiple platforms to reach children. As one parent explained, her children watch a lot of Netflix and as a result spend less time watching regular television programming.

“Although he doesn’t see very many real commercials most of the time he watches Netflix” (mother of a six-year-old boy, #7).

“Netflix especially. All those My Little Pony videos. I think they they are watching less and less normal television more Netflix” (mother of a five-year-old girl, #12).

5.3.2. Age and Gender as Possible Moderators

When compiling the wish lists, I made an interesting observation regarding the number of brands mentioned by the participating children. Although there was no significant difference between the boys and girls regarding the average number of items specifically mentioned by brand name, there appears to be a difference in the amount of brands mentioned by the different age groups. In terms of the number of brands mentioned by the boys, there seems to be a slight increase with age, with the five-year-olds collectively requesting four different brands, the six-year-olds collectively mentioning six brands and the seven-year-olds collectively requesting 7 items specifically by brand name. For the girls however, this trend appears to be the other way around. Unexpectedly, the five-year old girls requested more branded items than the older girls. The five-year-olds collectively mentioned five different items specifically by brand name, whereas the six-year-old and the seven-year-olds only mentioned one and two branded items, respectively.

5.3.3. Ability to Compare Similar Brands

The majority of the children who participated in the study were able to recall a brand name from memory. However, there were also a few children who demonstrated the ability to make comparisons between similar brands. While talking about a specific brand that they requested to be put on the wish list, they themselves would bring up a similar brand and draw comparisons. For example, while talking about Lego, one of the boys compared it to Duplo. Another boy compared Nike with Adidas and another one compared Xbox and Wii.

“For example Duplo. But I don’t like Duplo that much anymore most of the time. That is usually for babies” (m, 6, talking about what he would think of receiving a similar brand instead of Lego, #6).

“ (...) I am actually a really big fan of Nike and not of Adidas” (m, 7, #8).

“Because I have because I have the Wii and it works really bad” (m, 6, discussing the reasons why he wants an Xbox, #40).

5.3.4. Reasons for liking a particular brand

Children of course only mentioned brands they were fond of. When asked into more detail why they liked a particular brand, most children mentioned characteristics of the product itself or what they can do with it, not of the brand. This indicates that they requested specific items not necessarily because they like the brand, but because of what they can do with the product once they have received it.

“That eh eh that they can that they can have different bodies. You can switch the bodies” (f, 5, talking about why she likes Lego Friends, #1).

“Eh because you can build a lot with it and then you can and some things you can control with a remote” (m, 6, talking about why he likes Lego, #31).

“Ehm because there are different buttons on it” (m, 6, talking about why he likes Xbox, #40).

One of the seven-year old boys did express a specific reason as to why he liked the specific brand in question and not just a particular product, linking Nike to his love for soccer and his favorite teams.

“Because my favorite teams are in there” (m, 7, talking about why he likes Nike, #8).

5.3.5. Ways Children Come into Contact with Brands

As already described in the sections above, children are confronted with brands in various different ways. Seeing commercials and advertising messages on television is still the predominant way, but children nowadays are also frequently confronted with brands on Netflix in the form of brand-based movies and on electronic devices such as iPads in the form

of brand-based games. Furthermore, commercials on YouTube are also a way children come into contact with brands. Apart from commercials and advertising messages on television and electronic devices, children learn about different brands through their friends. Both parents (7) and children (6) have indicated that the children are aware of a specific brand because they have seen it when playing with a friend. One parent suggested that her son first sees a brand at a friend's house and then recognizes it on television.

“Ehm yes when I was with my friend” (m, 7, explaining where he first saw an Oxboard, #8).

“Through playing with others and after that they recognize it on TV” (mother of six-year-old boy, #41).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated five- to seven-year-old children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands. Extending a frequently used method, children compiled wish lists while participating in in-depth interviews. Afterwards, in-depth interviews were held with the parents as well. As a lot of previous studies have focused on children aged eight and over, the present study investigated the role of brands in the lives of children between five and seven years old.

Brand Awareness Compiling wish lists with gift requests and participating in in-depth interviews, the majority of the children of all age groups displayed a decent level of brand awareness. More than 2/3 of the children mentioned at least one brand to include on their wish list. This finding is in line with previous research that has found that brand awareness exists among children as young as three years old (Arnas et al., 2016; Preston, 2016; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). Of the products mentioned specifically by brand name, the children almost exclusively requested brands aimed at children. Previous research also found that brand awareness develops first for child-oriented brands (Otnes et al., 1994) and for adult-oriented brands at an older age when these brands become more relevant to their age group (John, 1999). One of the brands that was mentioned a lot during the in-depth interviews with the children was Lego, and various sub brands of Lego. This appears to be brand of great interest to both boys and girls in the specified age category. However, the question remains whether the participating children are really aware that Lego is a brand. Lego is an interesting case as it has almost become synonymous with the product itself. As a result, it is very possible that building with bricks in general is referred to as playing with Lego, even when the child could potentially be playing with bricks from an alternative brand. This could explain why most parents were of the opinion that their child or their children were not yet aware of specific brands, even though most of the children mentioned a specific brand name. Most parents indicated that their children know brand names and use them to refer to products, but do not yet know what a brand is.

There appears to be substantial link between watching television and children's brand awareness, based on their parents' opinion. Most parents indicated that their children watch television on a regular basis and that, after having seen a commercial for a product that they like, they will request it. However, they did indicate that the children forget about the commercials and the products they haven seen rather quickly. This is in line with findings of previous research that suggest that children's brand awareness is positively influenced by

exposure to television (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005) and that by the age of five children are able to recognize commercials as different from regular programming (John, 1999). Results of the in-depth interviews with the parents indicate that most children are indeed able to distinguish commercials and some of the children themselves have explicitly expressed that they've seen commercials on TV.

Brand Recall Although most of the children that participated in the research were able to recall at least one brand name while creating their wish list, there were of a few interesting cases in which children knew exactly what they would like to have for their respective birthdays, but could not recall the brand name. This even happened for brands that the children already owned a product of, which might be an indication that some children consider brand names to be less important compared to other children. Parents of these children were even more explicit in the fact their children are not aware of and do not care about brands at all.

Brand Associations In terms of brand associations, children appear to have very varied associations with the products they like. Some of these associations can be allocated to the categories defined by Keller (1993), but the findings of the present study also indicate that children have associations with brands that cannot be attributed to one of these three categories.

Brand Attributes Previous research has indicated that children in the preoperational stage are likely to make choices based on perceptual attributes (John, 1999). Children in the present study however did not express many product-related attributes when probed about their associations with the brand they requested. Non-product related attributes such as user imagery and pricing were more common (Keller, 1993). Children between five and seven years old appear to already associate certain brands with gender, indicating that particular brands were either for boys or for girls.

Brand Benefits The children did not express any benefits that they associated with using or owning a specific brand. As Keller (1993) indicated, symbolic benefits are a type of brand benefits. Findings related to symbolic benefits will be discussed below under *Brand Symbolism*.

Brand Attitudes Previous research has indicated that during middle and late childhood, children start to show a preference for certain brands, even when the products do not differ greatly. In the present study, children between five and seven years old expressed basic brand attitudes such as 'nice', but did not appear to favor certain brands over others. The majority of

the participating children indicated that they would like a similar product from a different brand just as much as the brand they had initially requested.

Parents have indicated that brand characters have a positive influence on their children's attitudes towards brands, providing examples of their children's preferences for 'K3 hagelslag' and packaging with brand characters such as 'Minions' or 'Dora the Explorer' on them. This is in line with previous research that highlighted the importance of brand characters in children's brand preferences (Danovitch & Mills, 2014).

Brand Symbolism Most children that participated in the present study appear to have developed Theory of Mind, as most of them were able to express what other people might be thinking when they would see them play with a certain brand. Nevertheless, although previous research has indicated that a developed Theory of Mind could help children understand the symbolic meaning of brands (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010), children do not yet seem to comprehend brand symbolism. Most parents also indicated that their children were not aware of the social meaning behind a brand and that they did not yet make inferences or assumptions about other people based on the brands they used or played with. This is in line with previous research that found that children do not understand consumption symbolism until they are seven or eight years old (Achenreiner & John, 2003) and that they slowly start to make assumptions about others when they are eight (McAlister & Cornwell, 2005). The present study supports these findings, as there was only one parent who indicated that his son was aware of the symbolic meaning of brands. As his son's eighth birthday was only a little over a month after the interview was conducted, he was the eldest in the group and closest to the age of eight previously indicated as the limit for understanding brand symbolism.

Self-Brand Connections Most children in the present study do not appear to use brands to build or express their self-identity. Three children have indicated that they like a certain brand because it offers products that are related to a profession they would like to perform when they are older. This suggests that they might identify with specific products of a brand, but not necessarily with the brand itself as parents almost unanimously indicated that their children do not like or use brands in order to make a statement about themselves or to present themselves in a particular way. Previous research has indicated that self-brand connections are starting to form in middle childhood and that seven- and eight-year-olds start to create self-brand connections based on brand associations, such as owning a particular brand (Chaplin & John, 2005). The seven-year-olds that participated in the current study did not

appear to have specific self-brand connections, although one parent indicated that his seven-year-old son might prefer certain brands because of what it says about him.

Drivers of children's relationships with brands One of the aims of the present study was to explore the key drivers between children's relationships with brands. As apparent from the findings discussed in the sections above, children between five and seven years old do not form relationships with brands because they identify with them and want to express their self-concept through them. They also do not appear to connect with certain brands because they believe that these brands will make them popular or help them project a certain image. Children in the preoperational stage appear to like brands because of the characteristics of the product itself and what they can do with them. It appears that the experience connected to a particular brand is more important at this stage.

Ways children come into contact with brands In addition to becoming aware of brands through television, children are also confronted with brands through brand-based movies on Netflix and brand-based games and videos on electronic devices such as iPads. As frequently mentioned in the interviews, children seem to predominantly be confronted with brands on television and online. Additionally, children appear to come into contact with brands through friends. As evident from the in-depth interviews, children between five and seven years old are confronted with brands in various ways and through multiple brand platforms.

The present research makes a unique contribution to the literature by extending a frequently employed method of investigating children's brand awareness. Previous studies collected children's wish lists, but did not investigate the content of these wish lists further. The present study compiled children's wish lists for their birthday while conducting in-depth interviews, which has led to interesting insights into children's brand knowledge and their relationships with brands. The present research has demonstrated that, in addition to an awareness of brand names, children in the preoperational stage between five and seven years old appear to also be aware of and are able to name sub brands. Furthermore, in terms of brand associations, non-product related attributes seem to be the predominant associations children in the specified age category have with brands that they are fond of. Especially associations related to user image appear to be relevant to five-to-seven-year-old children. Associations related to benefits however, do not appear to play an important role in preoperational children's minds yet. Additionally, children in the preoperational stage are confronted with brands and advertising messages on multiple brand platforms. In addition to regular television programming, children are confronted with advertising messages on platforms such as YouTube, but also brand-based videos on Netflix and brand-based games

on electronic devices such as iPads have an influence on children's brand knowledge. Children between five and seven years old already know how to find these brand-based videos and games and appear to actively look for them.

6.1. Propositions and suggestions for future research

The interviews have indicated that children come in contact with different brands in various ways, such as commercials on television, videos and games on electronic devices and seeing friends with a particular brand. Additionally, a few parents have suggested that their children having older siblings also might have an effect on their brand awareness. Seeing an older sibling, who is already in a different stage of cognitive development and for whom brands might play a more prominent role, might lead these children to be confronted with certain brands earlier than their peers. Future studies could investigate the link between a child's level of brand awareness and the degree to which they consider brands to be important and the level of brand awareness and brand importance of a(n) older sibling(s). Conducting in-depth interviews with both or multiple siblings and comparing the results might lead to interesting additional insights into children's brand knowledge and relationships with brands. Therefore, I suggest the following proposition:

Proposition 1:

Children's level of brand awareness and the degree to which brands are important to them might be influenced by observing their older siblings using or favoring particular brands.

The in-depth interviews showed that, apart from a few exceptions, children between five and seven years old would enjoy the same product from a different brand than they initially requested just as much. Even for brands they already own multiple products from and with which they play regularly they appeared to be satisfied with an alternative brand as well. This suggests that children in the aforementioned age category do not yet display a substantial amount of brand loyalty. For the children it appears to be more about the experience and what they can do with a particular product and not yet about the brand. Future research could investigate the presence of brand loyalty in this age category into further detail. In the current study, nearly all the children expressed that a similar product from a different brand would be nice as well. Future studies could carry out experiments in which children are confronted with

multiple products that look the same or have the same function but are from different brands in order to find out which product they choose. The following proposition arises:

Proposition 2:

Children between five and seven years old do not yet display a substantial amount of brand loyalty.

Those children who did express that they would not like a comparable product from a different brand, indicated that they wanted a particular product from a specific brand because they desired to collect all the products belonging to that one brand. This suggests that one element of brand loyalty might be the appeal of collecting all these related products and having a complete set. Future research could investigate the appeal of collecting products that belong together by conducting further in –depth interviews or experiments on the subject. Future studies could also investigate the appeal of collecting items that you receive when spending a certain amount of money on groceries. Children have expressed unsolicited that they like collecting items such as ‘moestuintjes’ from Albert Heijn or little Smurf figures from Plus. I would therefore like to suggest to following proposition:

Proposition 3:

Children might favor certain products over others or display a certain amount of brand loyalty because of their desire to collect a complete set of related products belonging to a specific brand.

A few of the participating children appear to display an emerging ability to directly compare related brands. For example, a child compared Nike with Adidas and another one drew a comparison between Lego and Duplo. Future studies could investigate the characteristics that lead children between five and seven years old to recognize the similarities between brands belonging to the same category. Conducting experiments in which children have to group brands that they perceive to belong to the same category could reveal interesting insights into the characteristics of brands that children consider to be related. The following proposition arises:

Proposition 4

Children between five and seven years old appear to begin to show the ability to draw comparisons between different brands in the same category.

Both children and parents have indicated that children's brand awareness is influenced by watching regular television programming and commercials. However, the in-depth interviews have also indicated that children are confronted increasingly through other brand platforms as well. They seem to watch quite a lot of brand-related videos about for example My Little Pony and Lego on Netflix or YouTube. Furthermore, they also play brand-related games on electronic devices such as iPads. Future research could investigate the effects of children being confronted with brands in multiple different ways on various digital brand platforms. As indicated by one of the parents, children might watch less regular television programming, making it more difficult nowadays for brands to reach children through regular commercials. Future studies could investigate whether children are indeed watching less regular television programming and thus less traditional commercials and instead watch more Netflix and YouTube. This might lead to brands having to develop innovate ways to reach children, such as for example brand-based movies on Netflix or brand-based games on tablets. I would like to suggest the following proposition:

Proposition 5

Children between five and seven years old are becoming increasingly aware of brands not just through regular television programming with the accompanying commercials, but through multiple brand platforms including Netflix, YouTube and brand-related games on electronic devices.

Interestingly, in the present study it appears that five-year-old girls are more aware of brands or better at recalling brand names compared to seven-year-old girls. The five-year-old girls requested more products specifically by brand name, collectively requesting five different brands. The six-year-old girl only requested one item by brand name and the seven-year-olds collectively requested two branded items. Future research could investigate the potential difference between the younger and the older girls in terms of brand awareness and recall of brand names. Possibly, five-year-old girls play more with specific physical toys and can therefore name them, whereas girls, as they get older, might start to develop other interests that do not involve as many physical branded toys. The following proposition arises:

Proposition 6:

The amount of products requested specifically by brand name decreases as girls get older.

A few parents have indicated that they would consider buying branded products to protect their children from becoming outsiders, which suggests that they consider brands as way to fit in or belong to the group. Especially in terms of clothing they appeared to be willing to buy certain brands if the children indicated that they would want that in order to fit in. Future research could further address parents' willingness to buy branded products as a means to protect their children but also further investigate the children's opinions in terms of liking brands that their peers have and wanting to fit in. Furthermore, future studies could investigate the link between parents' willingness to buy brands and the children's interest in brands.

Proposition 7

In the five-to-seven age category, parents are already considering buying branded products for their children in order to protect them from becoming outsiders.

6.1.1. Additional suggestions for future research

Future research could investigate the findings of the present study in a large-scale study. Finding a creative way to develop surveys that are appropriate and understandable for young children could lead to interesting and more generalizable results. Furthermore, future studies could investigate five to seven year old children's brand knowledge and relationships with brands in product categories other than toys. The present in-depth interviews focused almost exclusively on toy brands, but future studies could include other product categories such as food or clothing. These categories were briefly discussed with the parents during the interviews, but investigating the children's point of view on brands in these categories could lead to interesting insights. Furthermore, the present study only examined brands that children are aware of and that they like. Future studies could conduct in-depth interviews in order to investigate children's opinions on brands that they are aware of but do not necessarily like or enjoy. Additionally, future studies could also investigate whether there is a link between children's brand awareness and brand preferences and other variables, such as household

income. Furthermore, interesting insights could arise when investigating cultural differences. Children growing up with one cultural background might have different levels of brand awareness or consider brands to be more or less important than children growing up in other cultures.

6.2. Implications

The results of the present study are not intended to be used in order to target commercials or advertising messages directly at children. As this study indicates, children are confronted with brands in a lot of different ways and through various different platforms. Managers should consider this in order to avoid aiming their advertising content at children as this is more and more frowned upon in society. Taking a clear stand as to not target children could have a positive impact on the company's image, or at least avoid image damage.

Furthermore, results of the present study indicate that brands are spreading their advertising messages through various different brand platforms. Netflix offers movies based on brands or brand characters such as Lego and My Little Pony, and games based on brands are available on multiple electronic devices. As children nowadays spend a lot of time using electronic devices in addition to watching television and are very good in using these devices on their own, as evident from the interviews, it is important for society to be aware of what children are confronted with when using electronic devices such as iPads. As mentioned in one of the interviews, commercials and other advertising messages can be hidden in games or videos and pop up unexpectedly. Keeping this in mind can help make sure that young children are not overly exposed to commercials and advertising messages.

An interesting finding of the present study was that children appear to like collecting different items or products from the same brand that belong together. Brand managers or the R&D department of toy brands could use this insight by developing a range of products that highlights the collectability of these items or by highlighting the collectability of their existing products. It could give the company a competitive edge, while at the same time providing children with products that they would enjoy because they can collect them.

Furthermore, a few of the children between five and seven years old have demonstrated the ability to draw comparisons between brands that are similar and belong to the same product category, such as Lego and Duplo. Brand managers should therefore, also for child-oriented products, make sure to clearly distinguish their brand from competitive brands. Being distinctive from other brands could lead to children developing a more favorable attitude towards the company's brand.

6.3. Limitations

The present study contains a few limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the interviews were coded just by me, which may have resulted in interpretation bias. In addition, most of the participating children did not know me prior to the study. I tried to spend as much time as possible with every participant in an attempt to make them feel more comfortable talking to me and pretty much all of them volunteered right away to participate in the interviews. Nonetheless, some of the participating children were nervous during the interview and a little bit hesitant in their answers. This might have kept them from discussing their opinions in greater detail. Furthermore, children were very excited to show me some of their toys during the interviews in order to illustrate their answers. On the one hand, this encouraged them to talk to me and gave them something to focus on. On the other hand it also distracted them at times, which sometimes interrupted the interviews a bit. Another limitation might be the fact that the interviews focused on products that children would like to receive for their birthday. Children whose birthday is close to the interview date might have already thought about what they would like to receive for their birthday and were therefore more involved compared to the children whose birthday is still further away. Similarly, a few of the participants had already celebrated their birthdays a few weeks prior. In order to solve this issue, I asked them if there were any products that they hadn't received for their birthday, but that were still on their wish lists. In most cases this resulted in the children naming a several items. However, in a very limited amount of cases the children could not think of anything they would like to have. In those cases we talked about gifts they had already received for their birthday. Additionally, the parents that participated in the in-depth interviews seemed to have different definitions of a brand. Some of them focused on more expensive, high-end brands and did not, for example, consider Hema to be a brand, whereas other parents did appear to consider Hema or Primark as brands as well. Lastly, talking about the importance of brands and their personal preferences thereof might be sensitive subject. Although I had the impression that most parents who participated in the study were honest, open and forthcoming in their answers, the study might be prone to social desirability bias.

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8. Appendix

8.1. Interview guide

8.1.1. Interview guide children

Before compiling the wish lists and conducting the interviews, the parents/guardians were asked for permission to record the interview and assure them that the interview will be anonymous. The child's name will not be mentioned in the analysis in order to protect the child's identity. They were informed that if they would like, I would send them a copy of the transcript and the final thesis.

1. Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Spend some time with the child in order to for him/her to get to know me a little bit and make him/her more comfortable talking to me.
- Briefly and very simply explain the reason for the exercise and the interview: understanding which items/products are important to the child and why. Mention that it is for a school assignment to make them feel special and to create a bond.
- Thanking the child for participating in my research.

[QUESTIONS BELOW NEED TO BE ADDRESSED SEPARATELY FOR EVERY ITEM MENTIONED ON THE WISH LIST]

Note: As children in the proposed age category might not be familiar with the term 'brand' and what it represents exactly, I refer to branded products/items as 'product/item X' in the interview guide, depending on the specific products/items the children wish to include on their lists.

2. Reasons behind the choice for a specific item

2.1. Branded items are included on the list

- Can you tell me a little bit about why you want this item for your birthday?
- Why you like this product/item?
- Why was this the first item you mentioned for your wish list? (*Give the child time to answer*). Do you want/like this item more than the others? Why?

- Do you already have something else like item X? (*Give the child time to answer*) Do/did you like it? Why?

2.2. Unbranded items are included on the list

- So, you would like item X: is there a particular type that you want?
Yes: Which item X do you want?

Refer to questions 2.1

No:

- Are there certain /products items X that you like more than others?
Yes: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

3. Children's Relationships with Brands

3.1. Brand associations

- When you see or use product/item X, what do you think about? (*Give the child time to answer*) Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

3.1.1. Brand Attributes

- I don't know product/item X. Could you explain/describe it to me?
- When you see product/item X (or its packaging), what is the first thing you see?

3.1.2. Brand Attitudes

- Attitudes: *This topic has likely already come up while discussing the questions under 2: What do you like about this product/item? Can you tell me a little bit about that?*

3.2. Brand Symbolism

3.2.1. Branded items included on the list

- *Likely already come up while discussing question 3.1: Can you tell me what you think of when you see or play with this brand? (Give the child time to answer) Why do you think that?*
- When you use/play with this item, how do/would you feel?
- Would you use/play with this item in front of/with others?

- Who do you think likes this brand? (*Give the child time to answer*) Why do you think that?

3.3. Self-brand connections

3.3.1. Branded items included on the list

- *This question has likely already come up while discussing the questions under 2: What do you like about this product/item? Can you tell me a little bit about that?*
- So, you have told me that you would like product/item X. How would you feel if you got this product/item, but not exactly the one you wanted? Why? Could you explain that to me a little bit?
- *When it becomes clear that the child has nothing more to add: Let's pretend that you are playing with this item and someone sees you: what do you think does that person think about you?*

4. Moment/situation the child first learned about a brand.

- Do you remember when you saw or heard about this item for the first time? Can you tell me a little bit about that?
(If the child does not remember, help him/her a little bit by asking if they maybe saw it on TV, in a store or at a friend's house etc.).

5. Additional questions

- Are there any items you would like to have but that we didn't write down?

8.1.2. Interview guide parents

1. Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Explain the reason for the interview: understanding children's relationships with brands, which brands are important to the child and why.
- Thanking the respondent for participating in the research.
- Ask the parents/guardians for permission to record the interview and assure them that the interview will be anonymous. Their names will not be mentioned in the analysis in order to protect their identity.
- Inform them that if they would like, I will send them a copy of the transcript and the final thesis.

2. Children's Brand Awareness

- To what extent do you think that [name of the child] is aware/conscious of specific brands that surround them?
- Do you remember around what age [name of the child] became aware of brands? *(Give time to answer the question)*. When do you think did brands start to play a role?
- To what extent do you think are brands important to [name of the child]?
- Are there brands that [name of the child] is particularly fond of? Brands that [name of the child] mentions frequently?

If yes:

- Which brands?
 - o In case the parent(s)/guardian(s) only mention specific toy brands:
 - Do they prefer certain brands in other product categories such as clothes or food for example?
- Could you describe in which situations they mention specific brands?
- If [name of the child] prefers a certain brand in product category, does he/she reject products from other brands?
- Do they watch television on a regular basis? *(Give time to answer the question)*. Do you think the amount of television [name of the child] watches influences/has influenced his/her awareness of brands?

If no:

- Why do you think that they don't request specific branded products?
- Do they watch television on a regular basis? (*Give time to answer the question*). Do you think the amount of television [name of the child] watches influences/has influenced his/her awareness of brands?

3. Children's Relationships with Brands

3.1 Brand Associations

- In your opinion, what does [name of the child] associate with product/brand X?
- Has [name of the child] mentioned any specific associations with product/brand X? Or brands in general?

3.1.1. Brand Attributes

- Could you tell me about characteristics of a certain brand or brands in general that appeal to [name of the child]? *Give time to answer*. What about a brand's logo, brand characters, packaging etc.?

3.1.2. Brand Attitudes

- Do you know why [name of the child] likes product/brand X that he/she mentioned during the interview? Could you elaborate on that?
- When you and [name of the child] go shopping together, which products/product categories does [name of the child] get excited about? Could you elaborate on that?

3.2. Brand Symbolism

- [Name of the child] mentioned brand X. To what extent do you think that [name of the child] is aware of the (social) meaning connected to this brand?
- *Likely already discussed under 3.1:* To what extent do you think [name of the child] has specific associations with brand X? (*Give time to answer the question*). When [name of the child] talks about a brand, does he/she mention specific associations?
- Have there been situations in which your child made inferences about someone based on a brand that person owned/used?

3.2 . Self-Brand Connections

- Do you think that [name of the child] likes certain brands or wants to own certain brands because of what it says about him/her? Could you elaborate on that?
- Does [name of the child] care what others think about him/her?

4. Moment/situation the child learned of a brand

- How do you think did [name of the child] learn of these brands?
- To what extent do you think that television/television commercials play a role in your child's brand awareness?

5. Additional questions

Parents' attitudes towards brands

- To what extent are branded products important to you?
- To what extent do you buy (well-known) branded products for [name of the child]?
 - o To what extent do you buy the branded products that [name of the child] specifically asks for?
- How does [name of the child] integrate brands into his/her everyday life?
- Additional questions depending on the interview with the child. Ask for comments/opinions/insights regarding interesting things the child mentioned during the interview.
- Are there any situations/stories involving [name of the child] and a specific brand that you would like to share?

8.2. Overview of Respondents

Respondent Nr.	Name	Relationship to Child	Gender	Age	Length of Interviews
1.	Hanne		f	5	21:55
2.	Heidelinde	Hanne's mother			26:05
3.	Martijn	Hanne's father			
4.	Dirk		m	5	15:43
5.	Katja	Dirk's mother			17:32
6.	Marijn		m	6	21:04
7.	Rianne	Marijn's mother			10:50
8.	Silvijn		m	7	10:52
9.	Feline		f	5	10:09
10.	Patrick	Feline & Silvijn's father			14:01
11.	Lexie		f	5	6:37
12.	Marleen	Lexie's mother			18:42
13.	Sam		m	7	11:27
14.	Karen	Sam's mother			10:35
15.	Elin		f	5	3:15
16.	Benthe		f	5	4:46
17.	Miranda	Elin & Benthe's mother			6:14
18.	Daan		m	6	7:05
19.	Emilie	Daan's mother			10:15
20.	Mila		f	6	4:46
21.	Layla	Mila's mother			11:58
22.	Nina		f	7	7:32
23.	Anouk	Nina's mother			12:02
24.	Vera		f	7	4:35
25.	Laura	Vera's mother			8:30

26.	Puck		f	7	5:46
27.	Vera	Puck's mother			16:32
28.	Daniel		m	5	12:27
29.	Csilla	Daniel's mother			22:55 (until recording stopped)
30.	Levi		m	6	6:48
31.	Niels		m	6	7:28
32.	Maaïke	Niels' mother			6:51
33.	Tijn		m	5	12:07
34.	Mels		m	5	6:08
35.	Daphne	Tijn & Mels' mother			6:20
36.	Kelly	Tijn & Mels' mother			
37.	Lars		m	7	12:43
38.	Jort			6	5:54
39.	Marije	Lars & Jort's mother			6:51
40.	Svedde		m	6	9:43
41.	Wenda	Svedde's mother			22:29