

WHEN DO NON-FOOD BRANDS MATTER TO CHILDREN?

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic of consumer socialization of children. There are growing concerns about marketing to children and the ethics behind it. It is therefore important to know how much marketers influence children and how their influence can be limited. Our study aims to provide insights into this phenomenon using the example of non-food brands in the context of Slovenia, where the topic has received little attention so far. The results of our qualitative research on six focus groups of children aged 7–13 show that there are differences in brand importance and brand recall between younger and older children. Children believe brands are important for specific non-food products; however, older participants, rather than younger ones, believed that brands are important for a greater number of the non-food product groups presented. The results show that marketers are successfully trying to appeal to children, which is ethically questionable, so we propose some solutions to this problem.

Keywords: children, brands, non-food products, brand perception, brand attitudes

KDAJ SO OTROKOM POMEMBNE BLAGOVNE ZNAMKE NEŽIVILSKIH IZDELKOV?

Povzetek: Namen tega članka je prispevati k bazi znanja na temo socializacije otrok kot porabnikov. V zvezi z etičnostjo trženja otrokom se pojavlja vse več pomislekov, zato je pomembno vedeti, koliko tržniki vplivajo na otroke in kako je njihov vpliv mogoče omejiti. S svojo raziskavo želimo prispevati vpogled v ta pojav na primeru blagovnih znamk neživilskih izdelkov v kontekstu Slovenije, kjer je bila tematika proučevana v omejenem obsegu. Rezultati kvalitativne raziskave na šestih fokusnih skupinah otrok, starih od 7 do 13 let, kažejo, da obstajajo razlike v pomembnosti blagovne znamke in priklicu blagovne

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znamke med mlajšimi in starejšimi otroki. Otroci verjamejo, da so blagovne znamke pomembne za določene neživilske izdelke; vendar so v primerjavi z mlajšimi udeleženci starejši menili, da so blagovne znamke pomembne za večje število predstavljenih skupin neživilskih izdelkov. Rezultati kažejo, da so tržniki uspešni pri trženju izdelkov otrokom, kar je etično vprašljivo, zato v članku predlagamo možne rešitve tega problema.

Ključne besede: otroci, blagovne znamke, neživilski izdelki, zaznavanje blagovnih znamk, odnos do blagovnih znamk

1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in children as consumers began to develop after World War II (McNeal, 1992). After the war, full-time employment was more common for young people, which meant that they had relatively high wages. Income also increased for parents. Together with other changes that occurred between 1970 and 1980, such as fewer children per parent, the postponement of having children, dual-working families, and higher educational levels of parents, the economic power of children increased along with the greater influence that they have on family decisions (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1992). Parent-child relationships also changed and became more liberal, especially in Western societies. Child rearing patterns were no longer characterized by authority, respect and obedience, but by negotiation, understanding, equality and compromise, allowing children to influence family decisions (Torrance, 1998).

Over the last twenty years, children have been surrounded by brands and almost completely immersed in the brandscape (cf. Pecheux & Deribax, 1999). The global market for children today is huge and continues to expand at a rapid pace (Zhang, 2020). Children buy a wide range of products and services, and because the size of the market and the purchasing power of children are so large, many companies are trying to understand this market (Gunter & Furnham, 2004). However, children are not only important for their economic and purchasing power. They are a very important consumer group for three main reasons. First, apart from the fact that they have a large amount of money they are willing to spend on products and services, which makes them the primary market, they are also the market of the future. Secondly, because children develop loyalty at a young age, marketers believe brands should talk to them while they are still young. And finally, they are influencers – they influence household purchases such as sweets, cereals and even restaurants, holiday destinations and cars (Assael, 1981; McNeal, 1992; Chaudhary et al., 2020). Because of their significant market potential, children therefore represent an attractive party to which brand relationships can be built (Lopez & Rodriguez, 2018).

However, there are growing concerns around marketing to children (Watkins, Aitken, Robertson & Thyne, 2016) and the ethics behind it. Previous research has shown that children are unable to distinguish between commercial and non-commercial content (Wartella, 1980) or to recognize the persuasive and selling intent behind

marketing messages, leaving them vulnerable (Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011). Marketers use their creative talents to further blur the distinctions between commercial and non-commercial content and selling intent in marketing messages (Grohs, Reisinger, Wolfsteiner & Haas, 2013). It is evident that in the children–marketer relationship, the marketers have the power over the children. This is an unequal relationship where children are seen as disadvantaged and marketers take advantage of their position (Reddy, Reddy & Reddy, 2020). Our study therefore aims to provide insights into how much marketers influence young children and how this influence can be limited.

Consumer socialization takes place in the context of dramatic cognitive and social developments, often seen as occurring at different stages as children mature throughout their childhood (John, 1999). The socialization of the child consumer depends in part on cognitive maturation, and psychological theories of cognitive development provide a suitable theoretical framework for studying child–brand relationships (Hémar-Nicolas & Rodhain, 2017). Brands are important for children and become more important with increasing age (Achenreiner & John, 2003).

Previous research shows that very young children recognize mostly food brands that they are exposed to in their everyday lives (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). As they grow older, children pay more attention to details and consequently to brands (Wang & Li, 2019). A sophisticated understanding of the symbolism and thus the meaning of brands occurs between 7 and 11 years of age (John, 1999); however, researchers come to different conclusion when this happens. Achenreiner and John (2003) found that 12-year-olds but not 8-year-olds are able to think about brands on a symbolic level, and similarly Chaplin and John (2005) conclude that fifth graders (10 year-olds) are able to do so, while third graders (8 year-olds) are not. On the other hand, Nairn, Griffin and Wicks (2008) found that already 7–8 year-olds associate brand symbols with the characteristic of the user. Wang and Li (2019) demonstrate that the critical point at which the brand becomes important to children occurs at around 9 years of age. The discrepancy in the results could be due to different product categories used in various studies. Our study therefore intends to contribute to greater clarity and covers various publicly and privately consumed non-food product categories.

In the context of non-food products, previous research has mostly focused on how children

perceive clothing brands and what social and psychological effects this has. For example, Roper and Shah (2007) analysed the social impact of clothing brands on children (7–11 years) in the UK and Kenya. Similarly, Elliott and Leonard (2006) analysed children's attitudes towards fashion brands, specifically trainers, and tried to find out what symbolic meaning they have for children (8–12 years). In Slovenia, Lovšin, Lörger and Koch (2014) focused on the importance of clothing brands in the lives of children (10–14 years). McAlister & Corwell (2010) argue that the use of fashion brands in several studies leads to the conclusion that »tweens« are the youngest children who are able to understand the symbolism behind brands. However, this could be due to the fact that young children are not yet interested in fashion.

Based on our review of the literature, we can identify discrepancies in the knowledge of when brands begin to become important to children. Furthermore, most researchers focus only on clothing brands and not on other non-food products that children come into contact with on a daily basis. More research is needed on this issue; therefore, the purpose of our research is to contribute to the body of knowledge on the subject of consumer socialization of children, in particular knowledge on brand conceptualization, brand awareness, and understanding of brand symbolism. Our aim is to define the consumer socialisation of children through the theoretical approaches related to branding and children's marketing and conduct qualitative research to provide insights into how children understand non-food brands in the context of Slovenia. Existing research about consumer socialization of children mostly provides insights from the developed Western economies, so our study adds to this knowledge by finding common ground and context-specific differences. We derived our main research question as: When do brands matter to children? Based on the research insights into how much marketers influence children we aim to discuss how to protect children by more effectively limiting the power of companies when marketing to children.

Our study therefore makes several contributions to existing knowledge. First, we trace the patterns when brand understanding, brand awareness, and brand symbolism understanding develop in children in the examined context and add to existing insights. Second, the novelty of our study is that we include several non-food categories, which allowed us to observe differences in brand recall and brand symbolism across these categories. Finally, as children are a

sensitive target group, our next contribution is to propose strategies to protect them from exploitation by advertisers.

2. CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION AND BRANDING TO CHILDREN

Consumer socialization is defined as *»processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace«* (Ward, 1974: 2). Marketers target children from birth because they are aware of the benefits that come from marketing to children. Using integrated marketing communication, all marketing communication is coordinated across all personal and non-personal media to achieve maximum efficiency and reach children continuously (24/7/360) (McNeal, 2007).

Our research into the development of children as consumers is based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development and John's (1999) framework of consumer socialization. Using the four stages of Piaget's cognitive development (sensorimotor: from birth to two years, preoperational: from two to seven years, concrete operational: from seven to eleven years, and formal operational: eleven and older), researchers can explain how a child develops in terms of consumer behaviour (Šramová, 2017). John (1999), building on Piaget's framework, identified three stages (defined by age groups) of children's consumer socialization that capture important cognitive shifts from pre-school to adolescence: the perceptual stage (3–7 years), the analytical stage (7–11 years), and the reflective stage (11–16 years). This model describes how a child's intellect develops through stages, also in relation to brand awareness and understanding the symbolic meaning of brands,

When children are at the analytical stage (7–11 years) of their development as consumers, they are aware of the complexity of the market and their way of arguing is more abstract and no longer driven only by their own perceptions (John, 1999). Moreover, according to the model that explains the stages of cognitive development, children at this age are critical of and do not trust advertising, but also do not perceive new forms of advertising, so that companies can have control over them (Šramová, 2017). When children are at the reflective stage (11–16 years) of their development as consumers, they have developed critical thinking about the market and its functions (John, 1999). In addition, according to the model that explains the stages of cognitive development, children at this age can understand the persuasive content of an advertisement, criti-

cally examine traditional forms of advertising and even reject them. However, their attention can still be captured by new forms of advertising (e.g. product placement) (Šramová, 2017).

Based on our main research question we developed three sub-questions that address the symbolic meaning of brands and relate it to the child's developmental stages. The questions will be presented and justified in the following paragraphs.

In order to act as consumers, children must be capable of both brand recognition and recall (Macklin, 1996). Remembering the brand is the consumer's ability to recall the brand name from memory when given a product category or the areas of use (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). Only when children are able to look beyond superficial appearances and think about brands on an abstract level are they able to recognize that the brand is a diagnostic feature of a product compared to other perceptual attributes. Therefore, our first research question focuses on how children conceptualize brands. This insight is important because children's understanding of brand names and brand related features influences their brand awareness (Aktaş Arnas et al., 2016) and defines their development as consumers.

Our second research question is related to brand awareness. We are interested in how much children are aware of non-food brands in different categories and what is the role that age plays in children's brand awareness. This insight is important because brand awareness is a necessary but not sufficient condition to predict when product brands will become relevant for children (Wang & Li, 2019). As Valkenburg and Buijzen (2005) point out, children start to develop strategies that enhance their memory at around 7 years of age. With increasing age, the number of brand names and products that children can remember increases (Aktaş Arnas et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). According to McNeal (2007), children aged between 4 and 6 years recognize brands of both food and non-food products. Children were very good at recognizing the following food products: cereals, sweets, cookies, chips, ice cream, fruit juice and peanut butter – all products they love and (probably) consume daily. They did not recognize brands of products typically consumed or used by adults, such as canned vegetables, milk, detergent and coffee. Similarly, children recognized non-food brands that they use daily, such as toys, clothes, video games and records, but they did not recognize brands of products such as books and jewellery (John, 1984, McNeal, 1992).

Our third research question is related to the understanding of brand symbolism. We want to get insight how important are non-food brands for children and what is the role that age plays in understanding brand symbolism. McAlister & Cornwell (2010) define brand symbolism as an understanding of the meaning attributed to a brand name. This includes an assessment of how a brand name symbolizes user characteristics (e.g. popularity, user image) and information about the products or services encompassed by the brand (e.g. perception of brand use). The stages of the Piaget framework that are most related to the development of children's understanding of brand symbolism are the preoperational and concrete operational stages (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). Research on understanding brand symbolism in children has provided more direct evidence of when product brands become important to children (Wang & Li, 2019).

The determination of age at which children are able to think about brands on a symbolic level varies from researcher to researcher. McAlister and Cornwell (2010), who analyzed the understanding of brand symbolism in children between 3 and 5 years of age, found that even children as young as 3 years old recognize some of the brands that are present in the fast food, soda, and toy markets. The results showed that they are more likely to recognize brands that are primarily aimed at children (most likely because they have the most experience with them). However, 3- to 5-year-olds scored poorly on brand symbolism, but on the other hand still show a developing ability to understand brand symbolism (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010).

Older children increasingly understand brand symbolism. Achenreiner and John (2003) found that 12-year-olds but not 8-year-olds are able to think about brands on a symbolic level, and similarly Chaplin and John (2005) conclude that fifth graders (10 years) are able to do so, while third graders (8 years) are not. On the other hand, Nairn, Griffin and Wicks (2008) found that 7–8-year-olds associate brand symbols with the characteristic of the user. In the study by John and Sujan (1990), 9- to 10-year-old children used abstract cues to categorize products, but left open the question whether the underlying attributes replaced by the product brand could still dominate over the superficial perceptual features of the product. Wang and Li (2019) report that the critical point at which the brand becomes important to children occurs at around 9 years of age.

Older children use brands to build and communicate their self-concept and to gain access to

a peer group (Elliott & Leonard 2004; Chaplin & John 2005). Studies have shown that 10- to 11-year-old children experience brands as an integral part of their lives, suggesting that they use brands in their social interactions and cultural life (Nairn et al., 2008; Hémar-Nicolas & Rodhain, 2017). In these cases, the brand is not only a symbol to distinguish a product, but also an element that contributes to the children's belonging to a peer group or their rejection from it (Hémar-Nicolas & Rodhain, 2017).

In the context of non-food brands, a study by Lovšin, Lorgier and Koch (2014), which focuses on the importance of clothing brands in children's lives, suggests that older children can sometimes even exclude a child from their company for wearing unbranded clothing. According to their study of 145 children (aged 10–14 years) from Slovenian primary schools, the three most important factors for children when buying clothes were comfort, colour, and affordability, while brands were the fifth of eight purchase decision factors and were therefore rated quite low. For boys and older children, however, brands were more important. When children were asked if they thought it was important that other children wore brands that they themselves liked, almost half of the respondents (49.6%) answered that they did. However, the results of the younger respondents showed that wearing unbranded clothing would not exclude a child from the company of other children, but this was more likely to happen with older children.

A study by Roper and Shah (2007) found similar results when examining the social impact of a brand on a child. According to their research, teachers in the UK believe that children (7–11 years old) are highly brand-conscious and may even cause social divisions between children by forming »in« and »out« groups. Moreover, the parents of these children believe that children who did not own the right brands were bullied and socially excluded. So the parents feel guilty because they cannot afford to buy the latest brands for their children. This was also confirmed by Elliott and Leonard (2006) from the children's point of view. They carried out a study on 30 children aged between 8 and 12 years. According to them, children prefer to talk to someone wearing branded sneakers and feel the pressure of their peers to wear sneakers that their friends wear to fit in and not be teased because of their clothes. They believe that certain brands are cooler and that these brands make them cooler among their peers (Roper & La Niece, 2009).

McAlister and Cornwall (2010) argue that the use of fashion brands in several studies leads to the

conclusion that »tweens« are the youngest children who are able to understand the symbolism behind brands. However, this is product category specific. Building on an evolutionary perspective, Daly and Wilson (in McAlister & Corwall, 2010) postulate that fashion symbolism is only relevant for the definition of self-image at the beginning of puberty, when clothing and fashion accessories become important tools to attract members of the opposite sex.

3. METHODOLOGY

Due to the exploratory nature of the research questions, qualitative methods were considered the most appropriate methodology. However, conducting focus groups with children poses its challenges (Gibson, 2007). For example, it is important that researchers encourage participation and break down the hierarchical relationship between adults and children. This can be done by using first names, starting sessions with ice-breakers and choosing the right place to conduct focus groups (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell & Britten, 2002; Gibson, 2007) – for example, conducting focus groups in schools where participants are 'insiders', which reduces the power imbalance between participants and researchers (Morgan et al., 2002; Broome & Richards, 2003; Hill, 2005). The choice of a circular seating arrangement or the children sitting opposite the facilitator can also help to project a non-authoritarian climate (Morgan et al., 2002; Gibson, 2007). All these suggestions were taken into account when conducting focus groups.

Data collection took place in February and March 2020. We used non-probability judgmental sampling to obtain the participants. All participants had signed parental consents (by their parents or legal guardians) for their participation in the study. The data collection took place in person at the children's primary school premises. All interviews were recorded for later data processing. A total of

52 children took part in six focus groups. According to Guest, Namey and McKenna (2016), three to six focus groups are sufficient to discover 90% of themes in discussion. Due to the nature of the topic and the fact that the children are the participants in the focus groups, we chose six focus groups (the top end) to collect most (accurate) data.

The focus groups were conducted in two different primary schools, Primary school A and Primary school B. We conducted four focus groups in Primary school A, which is located in a rural area, and two focus groups in Primary school B, which is located in an urban area. The largest focus groups had 10 participants and the smallest focus groups had 7 participants. The participants were between 7 and 13 years old. The duration of the focus group discussions was between 21 and 66 minutes. Table 1 presents the focus groups, including the primary school where the focus group took place, ages of participants in each focus group, and stages in the development as consumers of children participating in focus groups. The stages in the development as consumers depend on age of children (John, 1999; Šramová, 2017).

We followed the ethical principles of research and protection of the data obtained. Personal information about the participants of the focus groups is strictly confidential. Therefore, it is not possible to identify an individual or their family on the basis of the reported results. The data collected have been used only for the purpose of this research and not for any subsequent, non-research purposes that violate the privacy of this information.

The discussion guide for the focus group was divided into three parts. The first part consisted of introductory questions where participants had to introduce themselves, reflect on their shopping habits and understanding the term »brand«. In the second part they had to think about the brands of the different non-food product groups (clothing,

Table 1: Description of focus groups

Focus group	Primary school	Ages	Stage in their development as consumers
FG1 – younger girls	Primary school A	7–8 years old	Analytical stage
FG2 – younger boys	Primary school A	7–8 years old	Analytical stage
FG3 – older boys	Primary school A	11–12 years old	Reflective stage
FG4 – older girls	Primary school A	11–13 years old	Reflective stage
FG5 – older boys	Primary school B	9–13 years old	Analytical and reflective stage
FG6 – older girls	Primary school B	10–13 years old	Analytical and reflective stage

shoes, cosmetics, toys, game consoles, books, and mobile phones). They also had to assess the importance of brands for each of the groups. In the last part, they had to rank the importance of brands in the previously mentioned product groups from the most important to the least important by using stickers and a worksheet.

We conducted a focus group analysis according to the lines suggested by Berg (2007). We made a verbatim transcription of questions and answers and then analysed the content of the discussions in different groups with the aim of identifying patterns and trends that occurred in the focus groups. We followed the stage model of qualitative content analysis (Berg, 2007). When presenting the results, we explain and discuss them in the light of the results of previous research.

4. RESULTS

The **first research question** relates to whether the participants understand what the term »brand« means. When defining brands, both older and younger children have understood what a brand is, but younger participants have a less clear idea about it. Younger participants tend to equate the brand with the price by saying that the brand indicates the price of the product. Nevertheless, they understand that a brand consists of a logo and a slogan (e.g. *»Sometimes something is drawn and written. This is a brand, I think«*). The participants of focus groups with older children had a clear idea of what a brand is (e.g. *»An item of clothing has a brand, like Nike«* and *»A brand is a product, it is a company that makes it«*). It seems that older children understand the concept of a brand but tend to define it as something tangible (company or product) rather than delving into the intangible aspect of the brand (e.g. the connection between the company and the brand or a feeling a customer has for a product), which is understandable as the tangible explanation is easier to understand and follow.

Our **second research question** was about children's awareness of non-food brands and what role does age play in development of brand awareness. We investigated how well children remember non-food brands (they had to list the brands they remember in the following seven categories: clothing, shoes, cosmetics, toys, game consoles, books, and mobile phones). In general, younger children could remember fewer non-food brands than older children in most non-food categories observed (shoes, cosmetics, game consoles, books, and mobile phones).

Our **third research question** relates to how important brands are for children when buying non-food products. First, we asked the participants about clothing and shoes, the items that are more visible in their everyday life. The participants in all groups except the group with younger boys felt that the brand was important when buying clothes and shoes. At the same time, participants in almost all focus groups said that it was not important to them which clothing and shoe brands their family and friends wear. The girls in FG4 (older girls) mentioned that it was important for them which clothing brands their friends but not their family wear. In addition, all focus groups felt that friends would not exclude them from their company if they did not wear certain brands. They were pretty tough in their answers, both in terms of why they think it does not matter what their parents and friends wear (e.g. one girl (FG1, younger girls) said: *»We should not worry about what our friends wear, we should only worry about ourselves«*), and in relation to the question why they think friends would not exclude them from their company if they did not wear certain brands (e.g. one girl (FG6, older girls) said: *»If they do, they are not your real friends. If they were, they would accept you no matter what you wear«*). However, older girls in FG4 mentioned that although their friends would not exclude them from their company in primary school just because they wear unbranded clothes or clothes with unpopular brands, they believe that this is more likely to happen in high school where *»you have to wear good brands at least at the beginning to make a good impression«*. The boys in FG5 thought that their friends would not exclude them from their company if they did not wear certain brands, but they mentioned that wearing certain brands might make them more popular (e.g. one participant (FG5) said: *»They would like us better if we had certain brands, but they would not exclude us if we did not have them«*). We could observe that the participants often mentioned that it is not important whether one wears clothes with certain brands and that *»it is the inside that counts«*. However, they also often said that they wished they had more clothes from Nike or Louis Vuitton.

Similarly, the participants often mentioned that the character of the person is more important than the brand of shoes they wear (e.g. a boy in FG3 (older boys) said: *»I would not like a person who showed off the brands they wear, for me it is more important that they are nice«*). Furthermore, almost all focus groups felt that friends would not exclude them from their company if they did not wear certain brands. However, they mentioned that other people might judge them based on the shoes they

wear (e.g. one girl (FG4, older girls) commented: *»You are cooler if you wear some brands. But people would not exclude you for that«*). Only boys in FG3 (older boys) said that some people would exclude them from their company if they did not wear certain brands of shoes.

When it comes to products used at home, the results were different. Regarding cosmetics, opinions were mixed. Younger children were of the opinion that brands were not important when buying cosmetics, while the opinions of older children were divided. Some thought that brands were important when buying cosmetics and others argued the opposite, mostly stating that the purchase depends more on how your skin reacts to these products.

The situation was similar with the question about game consoles. Younger boys and girls were of the opinion that brands were not important when buying game consoles, while the opinions of older participants were divided. Older boys in both focus groups (FG3 and FG5) thought brands were important when purchasing game consoles, while older girls in both focus groups (FG4 and FG6) thought the opposite.

When asked about toys, only younger boys (FG2) felt that brands were important, while girls and older boys felt that brands were not important when buying toys (e.g. one girl (FG4) commented: *»I don't think brands are important when buying toys. But when I was little, I liked Barbie and preferred it. I am not sure why; I do not think I knew what brands were back then«*). The opinions of the FG5 participants were divided – some thought that brands were important when buying toys, others thought they were not.

The participants in all six focus groups were of the opinion that brands were not important when buying books and stated that what you want to read is more important than the brand of the book itself. With regard to mobile phones, the participants of FG1 (younger girls) and FG6 (older girls) were of the opinion that brands were not important when buying mobile phones (e.g. one girl (FG6) said: *»It does not matter what kind of phone you have; what is important is that you can use it to make a phone call«*). The participants of FG3 (older boys), FG4 (older girls) and FG5 (older boys), on the other hand, believed that brands are important when buying mobile phones. The opinions of the participants of FG2 (younger boys) were divided, with some believing that brands were important when buying mobile phones, while others thought that brands were not important when buying mobile phones. The

participants of FG6 also expressed their opinion that you can be bullied if you have an »old« phone, and one girl explained what happened in her class: *»You can be excluded if you own a different phone. My classmate made fun of my friend because she had a phone with buttons, and he asked her if her parents did not have enough money to buy her a real phone.«*

We can conclude that, according to our research, children believe that brands are important for certain non-food products, but older participants felt that brands are important for a greater number of the non-food product groups presented than younger participants.

When the children had to rank the importance of brands when buying different non-food product groups, the results were slightly different from their previous answers. The data show that among non-food products, the participants most often put clothes and mobile phones first, which means that they believe that brands are most important when buying clothes or mobile phones among the examined non-food products. The participants most often ranked books seventh, which means they believe that among the examined product categories brands are least important when buying books.

5. DISCUSSION

Our study explores the awareness and perception of importance of brands among children and tweens. It contributes to the body of knowledge on the topic of consumer socialization of children, specifically to the knowledge on brand awareness and brand symbolism understanding. The main research question was focused on when brands matter to children. We wanted to find out how children understand brands, what is the children's awareness of non-food brands, how important are non-food brands to children and what role does age play in this.

Our research shows that both older and younger children know what a brand is. Younger children, however, believe that a product with a brand will be more expensive and they are likely to think of expensive luxury brands. We can also observe that younger children see products as functional items, while older children see products more as symbolic items. Our findings are broadly similar to McNeal (2007) who states that younger children find it difficult to understand the difference between a brand and a product and tend to remember the products they are familiar with by their brand name. Our research supports the findings of Lindström and Seybold (2004) who state that

children start to become more aware of brands as they grow older and that when they become tweens they have a clear opinion about them.

Children are very brand-conscious and recognize a lot of non-food brands. When we asked about brands that children remember, we observed that younger children are less aware of brands than older children. This is in line with previous research which showed that as children grow older they also increase knowledge of existing products and brands on the market and consequently the number of brand names and products that children can remember increases (McNeal, 2007; Aktaş Arnas et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). The novelty of our research is that we included several non-food categories, which enabled us to observe differences in brand recall over these categories.

Among the categories, children remembered most clothing brands rather than, as expected, toys, since toys are primarily manufactured and marketed for children and, according to previous research, children should be most familiar with these brands. This differs from previous findings (John, 1984; McNeal, 1992) and may be due to the fact that most of the children who participated in the focus groups were tweens. Tweens are trying to discover themselves and build self-esteem during this time. They are very brand sensitive and brand knowledgeable, and usually want to define themselves through the brands they wear. For example, a child who wears clothes from Gap is committed to a mainstream designation, a child who wears Nike is committed to athleticism, and a child who wears Roots is committed to patriotism (in Canada). Thus, each brand carries a meaning that defines its wearer and tweens believe that a brand helps define who they are (Hulan, 2007).

While younger children (ages 7–8) did not think about brands at an abstract level, older children (ages 9 and older) expressed an understanding of the meaning attributed to a brand name, valued the way in which a brand name symbolizes user characteristics (e.g. popularity, user image) and information about the products or services encompassed by the brand (e.g. perception of brand use) and can lead to inclusion/exclusion. Our findings are different from Achenreiner and John (2003) who report brand symbolism understanding to develop at a later age (12 years) and Nairn, Griffin, and Wicks (2008) who detected this understanding at younger children (7–8 years). Our insights extend those of Wang and Li (2019) who demonstrate that the critical point at which the brand becomes important to children occurs at around 9 years of age.

When discussing clothing brands, children often mentioned that it is not important if you wear clothes with certain brands, but they also often said that they would like to have more clothes from Nike or Louis Vuitton. It seems that they downplay their importance because they do not have access to these brands (e.g. one participant mentioned that there is no point in buying such expensive clothes for them because they will outgrow them very quickly – which is probably something their parents said). The answers imply that children (at least in high school) want to wear certain brands to meet their need to fit in and support arguments by Ji (2008) and Hulan (2007) that children in their tween years use brands to express their identity. The motivation for a child to build a relationship with a brand comes from the need to develop a self-concept. According to Ji (2008), the development of self-concept changes with the age of the children: when they are in early adolescence, they try to connect with brands and seek popularity and acceptance through brands, which in turn motivates them to connect with brands. Hulan (2007) offers a similar idea: tweens lack self-confidence and individual identity and try to discover themselves during this time. They are very brand-sensitive and often try to define themselves through their purchases and with the brands they wear.

However, this was not the case in the discussion about shoe brands. Children in all focus groups (except FG4) felt that it did not matter what brand of shoes their friends wore and they did not feel that they were being excluded from the company by wearing unpopular shoe brands. This is not consistent with the findings of Elliott and Leonard (2006), who found that children prefer to talk to someone wearing brand name shoes and feel the pressure of their peers to wear sneakers that their friends wear to fit in and not be teased because of their clothes. This is probably because they do not wear their shoes at school, but have to wear slippers, so their friends rarely see the shoes they wear when they come to school. These insights point to a possible cultural specificity (children wear slippers at school, so shoes are not that visible) of the contexts under study and require further investigation.

When the children had to rank categories according to the importance of brands, the results showed that among non-food products, children felt that brands were most important when buying clothes or mobile phones. The results were not surprising. Children focus on clothing brands and even form in and out groups depending on what they wear (Roper & Shah, 2007). In addition, children use clothing brands to express

themselves (Hulan, 2007), so it was assumed that they would put clothes first most often. Mobile phones were also ranked first, which was also expected as they represent a large part of children's lives (Lake, 2017). We believe that children also often use phone brands to express themselves and define their identity.

Our study extends previous research in that we tested brand symbolism on several non-food categories, which allowed us to observe patterns of differences in the importance of brands across these categories. Our insights suggest that brands are important in categories that are more visible to peers (such as clothes, mobile phones and for older children also game consoles), while for non-food products that are used at home or are less visible (such as cosmetics, toys, and books) children attribute less importance to brands. One novel finding that stands out and could be context-specific is the importance of shoe brands, which seems to be opposite to what has been found in other contexts and can be attributed to Slovenian culture. Further quantitative research should be conducted to confirm these findings.

Children are very brand-conscious and recognize a lot of non-food brands. In general, this research showed that the attitudes of children towards brands are favourable. We can observe that younger children see products as functional items, while older children see products more as symbolic items and, thus, find brands more important. Children (older more often than younger) use brands to express themselves, define the quality and price of a product based on a brand, judge others by the brands they use, etc.

In summary, our study makes several contributions to existing knowledge. For the context under study, we trace the patterns when brand understanding, brand awareness, and brand symbolism understanding develop in children. The novelty of our study is that we included several non-food categories, which allowed us to observe differences in brand recall and brand symbolism across these categories. Our insights suggest that older children (9 years and older) understand brand symbolism and attach more importance to brands in non-food product categories that are more visible to their peers. As children are a sensitive target group, our next contribution is to propose strategies to protect them from exploitation by advertisers.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Companies use the time when children are in pre-tween years to position themselves in the

minds of children and become a part of the consideration set. Later, when children enter the tween years, they continue to target children with their marketing messages. Our findings reflect that children tend to be very aware of brands and are therefore in this regard promising for companies and their brands. A study conducted by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White shows a significant percentage of adult women use the same brands they did when they were teenagers, meaning that several consumer-related orientations tweens develop persist well into adulthood (Gunter & Furnham, 2004).

However, the question remains if advertising to children and initiating brand relationships with them is ethical. The first issue is that children do not have a fully developed cognitive ability and are thus unable to fully understand the persuasive nature of advertising. Since the basic ethical tenet is that the targeted audience must understand and be aware that the content directed at them is advertising, this point suggests that advertising to children is unethical. Secondly, there is the question of the product advertised. It is agreed upon that advertisements for adult products (e.g. tobacco and alcoholic beverages) are inappropriate for children, and a lot of effort is put into minimizing their advertising in programming frequented by children (Snyder, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are several stakeholders that take part in the process of consumer socialization of children and can take part in resolving the aforementioned issues. On the one hand, there are the advertisers, whom we have already mentioned. Advertisers should communicate in a way that does not imply that children will be superior to their peers by owning certain brands. As Holland (2019) suggests, instead of selling products, brands can use their social channels and air-time on television to inspire children, empower them, and demonstrate positive values. The next stakeholders are educators and parents, who are actually the first line of defence against exploitation of children by advertisers. Schools should teach children media literacy from a young age. Based on the insights of our study, such education should start at the beginning of the primary school. Teachers should teach children to think critically and understand the kind of relationship brands want to have with children as consumers. We should not forget that in addition to television children today are highly exposed to peer-to-peer communication via the internet, which is even more difficult to limit. Therefore, it is critical that children are educated about the meaning and importance of brands, advertising, influencers, and their strategies. It is not possible to entirely

limit or prevent this communication, but we can educate children to understand it and critically evaluate it.

Sometimes, however, ethical dilemmas are not enough to stop companies from targeting advertising to children. In this case, another stakeholder, namely the government, can step in. In Slovenia, children's exposure to advertising increased between 2005 and 2011, despite companies and the government joining the EU initiative to reduce children's exposure to advertising. The reason for this is probably the dispersion of the legislative framework (Zveza potrošnikov Slovenije, 2016). It is of great importance that all stakeholders (policy makers and members of civil society) create a stronger legal framework to limit marketers' actions directed at children if marketers are not willing to self-regulate their actions towards children (Reddy, Reddy & Reddy, 2020).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While focus groups are useful for revealing beliefs, attitudes, experiences and feelings of participants, there are potential limitations that this methodology has. We believe that children sometimes said what they believed we wanted to hear, what their parents said and wanted them to think or what they believed was socially acceptable, instead of what they really believed. Furthermore, some of the groups had participants that were dominant and thus imposed their opinion on others. In some cases, it is difficult to determine whether children have a homogenous view or whether they just appear more consistent than they actually are. It is also difficult to make generalizations based on the obtained data because we have conducted only six focus groups. Furthermore, we conducted only two focus groups with young children and four with older, creating an uneven sample. Focus groups were conducted in only two primary schools, both located in the same statistical region. The analysis and interpretation of the obtained data were also difficult since the answers varied from child to child and from focus group to focus group.

All these limitations restrict the collected answers and results. However, the purpose of our research was to get insights that can later be tested on a larger and more representative sample that would enable generalizations. Future research should focus on overcoming these limitations. We could conduct experiments to test importance of brands. Further, we could measure the cognitive ability of children and then relate it to age, brand

perception, and the ability to form brand relationships. We could also control for product-related experience and how it influences brand recall and brand perceptions. It would be also relevant to research whether brand personality influences brand relationships. On the qualitative side, in-depth exploration of how children perceive specific non-food brands could be conducted. Further research might also compare attitudes towards brands of children and attitudes towards brands that parents believe their children have. Future research should also take the Internet into consideration, and analyse children's responsiveness to branding on online digital media.

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