AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY PROJECTS

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Abstract

The thesis aims to extend the child brand relationship theory, a significant part of consumer culture theory (CCT), and consequently, provide a deeper understanding of the roles that brands play in the lives of children. It draws upon the literature of CCT, brand relationship theory and children as consumers. The objectives of this research are to explore children's understanding of the symbolic meanings of their brands, gain an understanding of how children use these meanings in their lived experiences and, in order to gain an understanding of the child brand relationships in context, explore different aspects of children's social and personal lives. The methodological approach of this research is qualitative because this research is primarily explorative in its nature. Thirty-one in-depth interviews were conducted with children of both genders, aged between 5 and 9 years old. The data was analysed using a coding process together with thematic analysis. In keeping with marketing scholarship, children in this research are viewed as active consumers who construct their individual and social identities and contribute to the social world. Consequently, children's own experiences and opinions were captured and ten themes emerged which reveal that children have purposive and meaningful relationships with brands at earlier ages than existing research suggests and these relationships are important for their social and personal lives. These themes provide the key findings of this research. The first theme explains that children's self-esteem is enhanced in the context of the digital age. Themes two and three demonstrate that brands help children develop their desired selves, gain social acceptance and position themselves and others in a social world. The fourth theme reveals that children, through the gendered symbolic meanings they attach to brands, are seeking to express their individuality amongst their peers. Next, this research establishes that children use brands to support their transition into adulthood and complete their social identities. The concepts of fantasy and brand relationships are explored in theme six which clarifies that superhero brands help children to create their "fantasy" worlds. Theme seven demonstrates that children have meaningful connections with brands which are embedded into their social relationships with parents/ caregivers. The final three themes show that certain brands which children use help them to obtain social affiliation in school, support their life-projects and entertain them. This research contributes to scholarship in the fields of CCT, brand relationship theory and studies of children as consumers. It provides new insights into children as active consumers which extends the brand relationship theory and is also valuable to marketing practitioners. Research limitations and future research are presented in the final chapter.

Keywords: brands; consumer culture theory; brand relationships; children as consumers; identity

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Overview

This chapter outlines the structure of the thesis which addresses and explores the sophisticated nature of children's relationships with brands and the role that they play in their lives. Furthermore, this thesis provides interesting insights into children as consumers from the consumer culture theory (CCT) perspectives and uncovers the purposive nature of their relationships with brands. The introduction chapter includes: 1.1 The rational and justification for this research; 1.2 Motivation for this study and research questions; 1.3 Objectives and research methodology; 1.4 Research contributions and 1.5 Thesis organisation.

1.1 The rational and justification for this research

From the outset, it is important to explain and clarify the rational and justification for studying children as active consumers (hereafter referred to as children as consumers) with their own voices. This section of the introduction chapter begins with clarification of the children's position as consumers and active individuals. It is followed by section 1.2 which provides the main aspects of motivation for this study and identifies the neglected position of children in the CCT stream of literature and proposes that little is known about the role of brands in their lives. Section 1.2 ends with the clearly articulated research questions. The following section 1.3 explains the research objectives which need to be achieved in order to satisfactorily complete this study.

There is a stream of literature which explores, explains and describes the role that brands play in the daily lives of individuals from a variety of perspectives. It is worth noting that brands are deeply integrated into the daily lives of individuals/consumers and that scholars continue to study the phenomenon of brands/brand relationships in the CCT discipline. Bode & Kjeldgaard (2017, p.258) for example, opine that 'marketers and consumers are understood as engaging jointly in a cultural space producing the reality of the brand'. Fundamentally, brands and brand relationships contribute to the individuals' self-concepts and identities (Fournier 1998; Belk 1988). The literature which addresses adults' relationships with brands and their active position in these relationships continues to grow (for example Macinnis & Folkes, 2017; Davvetas &

Diamantopouls, 2017), however the literature on children as active consumers remains very limited. Recently, Lopez & Rodrriguez (2018, p.130) repeat that 'research on the brand relationships phenomenon in children is scarce'.

Despite the fact that little is known about children's relationships with brands, children as consumers are well recognised by business practitioners and marketers as an attractive current and future target audience because it is accepted that they have their own purchasing power together with the influence they have on the purchasing power of their parents/caregivers. This recognition occurred a considerable time before scholars paid much attention to children as consumers and this is recognised by Cook (2000, p.488) who clarifies that in the 1930s '…merchants, manufacturers, and advertisers began to target children directly as individual consumers'.

Marketing scholarship now acknowledges that children are consumers in their own right and consumers who actively influence the purchasing power of their parents (Gbadamosi, 2010, 2012; Buckingham, 2011; Marshall, 2010; Gunter & Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1992, 1999). Whilst, the study of children as consumers is worthy of study from an academic marketing perspective alone, it is worth also considering them in the business context. The Guardian in 2015, for example, referred to Euromonitor and reported that 'The UK children's-wear market is worth £5.6bn'. More specifically, the 2015 Euromonitor report revealed that in the UK, parents spent £425 million on child-specific products (for example: fragrances, skin/hair products and others). Earlier, Marshall (2010) provided statistical data in which he argues that in 2000 the value of the child consumer market in the UK was £117bn. Earlier still, the Office for National Statistics (2009) stated that around 70% of children under 16 years old in the UK receive pocket money which they use to buy various products. Having clarified the attractiveness of children as a target audience for commercial organisations, it is important to illuminate that research on children as consumers began to be recognised as a clear body of research in the mid-1970s and then scholars were mainly interested in children's understanding of advertising (John, 1999). Furthermore, theoretical perspectives from 1910-1999 which address the concept of children as consumers, had been driven and guided by such disciplines as anthropology, psychology and sociology (Cook, 2000) to a greater degree than the marketing discipline. The concept of consumer socialisation, which is widely used by scholars, has been defined by Ward (1974, p.2) as 'the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and

attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace'. Later, John (1999) provided a fundamental paper which brings together the twenty-five years of research on children's roles as consumers. In this paper, she conceptualises the socialisation process using the cognitive development model of Piaget (1953). It is worthy of note that from the early 1970s until recently, marketing scholars continued to actively use the Piagetian developmental-cognitive approach to study children as consumers (Gbadamosi, 2018, 2012, 2010; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010; Ross & Harradine, 2004; Achenreiner & John, 2003; Ji, 2002). Despite the growing interest amongst marketing scholars to study children as consumers, it is very important to clarify the way children have been viewed by scholars from various disciplines whose views and ideas have been adopted by marketers. In relation to this matter, Cook's (2000) contribution is particularly valuable to this research project because he has clarified and explained that, from 1960, scholars began developing an interest in obtaining an understanding of children as consumers directly from children themselves, meaning viewing them less as passive beings than before. The late 1960s was the time when children began to be recognised as different consumers (or little consumers) who possess developmental limitations but whose voices began to be heard (Cook, 2000; McNeal, 1967; Wells, 1965). The further development of the concept of consumer socialisation in the 1970s encouraged the interest of scholars to study how children were developing as consumers and from the 1990s it has been established that 'children are agents who are active in their construction of the world and that consumer goods are part of that world' (Cook, 2000, p.503). Having explained that the consumer socialisation concept has been dominant in the field of marketing for just over a 25-year period, it remains an important concept which clarifies the age-related stages which children pass through in order to become adult consumers. Recent studies in consumer research show an interesting shift from the Piagetian cognitive-development model of viewing children towards a New Sociology of Childhood.

This research identifies the correlation between the ideas of Corsaro (2005) and Cook (2004, 2008). These are that a child is an active participant of the social world and, as such, is an important part of our scientific understanding of consumption and consumer culture. Therefore, their presence and practices must be recognised, considered and investigated. Moreover, it is well acknowledged that 'childhood is firmly embedded in the commercial marketplace' (Marshall, 2010, p.1) and children should be 'no longer seen as outsiders to contemporary consumer culture' (Martens *et al*., 2004, p.156).

Buckingham (2011) goes further and states that children are consumers from the moment they are born. Moreover, Cook (2008) argues that children are involved into the consumption process before their actual birth because frequently, the child's parents and immediate family make pre-birth purchases for the future baby. Hence, children 'enter the world already pre-figured as consumers' and consumer goods are part of 'a person's existence' even before they have abilities and any knowledge about purchasing processes and values (Cook, 2008, p.232).

This research focuses upon the position of the child as a consumer and is specifically driven by CCT, which views consumers as active meaning-makers and formers of their dynamic individual and social identities. Brand relationship theory, which is an integral part of CCT, explores the sophisticated role and importance of brands in the lives of consumers and reveals how brands contribute to the identity projects of consumers. Brands are clearly an integral part of the lives of individuals and CCT provides a socio-cultural discourse of the brand/brand relationships. The functional and emotional importance of brands is clear to see in the daily lives of many individuals. The mobile phones which are used, the car which is driven, the confectionary which is consumed and the clothes which are worn, each item holding a different meaning and serving a different purpose to each individual consumer, are all examples of the functional and emotional importance of brands in the lives of individuals. Notably, it is identified earlier in this section that children, whilst largely neglected, are active participants of the consumer world and actively engage with a wide variety of different brands from an early age. The following section clearly articulates the main motivation for this study and ends by providing clear research questions.

1.2 Motivation for this study and research questions

The child's world today is occupied by many and varied brands, icons and media characters which are created and produced for society. These categories are strongly integrated into children's lives and can be widely seen at school, in the high street, in magazines, on television and many other places. Children are clearly surrounded by, and engage with, different brands from their birth. Their homes quite likely contain a wide variety of different branded items with which they interact from an early age and yet little is known about how they engage with brands.

In relation to adult consumers, CCT advances our understanding of consumption and consumer behaviour and represents, according to Arnould & Thompson (2005, p.868): 'a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings'. This theory is based on the well-studied assumptions that products/ brands are being purchased, not only for utility reasons, but also for their symbolic meanings (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1988; Levy, 1959). Furthermore, consumers are viewed as active individuals who, through consumption and the symbolic meanings of brands, define themselves and locate themselves in a social world (Patterson & O'Malley, 2006; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Levy, 1959). The active position of consumers in relation to the purposive use of the symbolic meanings of brands is well clarified in consumer brand relationship theory and was initially developed by Fournier (1998). She emphasises the importance of the brand relationships for consumers' lives, explores how consumers relate to brands and stresses that these relationships are playing significant roles in consumer identity projects. The brand relationship theory is one of the central theories underpinning this research because the existing literature reveals that our understanding of children's brand relationships is limited and only very few papers address this concept in a direct manner (Lopez & Rodriguez, 2018; Rodhain & Aurier, 2016; Ji, 2002)

Having clarified that existing consumer culture research primarily focuses on adults, this research acknowledges Cook's (2008, p.219) argument that 'theories of consumption and consumer culture … do not know childhood' and this provides motivation to undertake this research. Daniel Cook, it is noted, is one of the foremost researchers in the area and stresses the neglected position of children's consumer culture in social research and thinking. Cook (2010, 2008) argues that children have, to date, largely been invisible in the aspects of consumerism. Moreover, he stresses that children should be included in the consumer culture research area to further our overall understanding because they are consumers and members of society who are active, valuable and who tend to develop their own identity. Martens *et al*. (2004, p.158) argue that the studies of the types of children's goods, toy cultures and other 'marketing, media and cultural studies have primarily been interested in the nature of markets for children's goods' as opposed to the children themselves. Significantly, they contend that researchers' interests in the symbolic meanings which children create around products/brands are neglected. Moreover, the importance of studying children themselves, rather than considering them as a homogeneous social group, and the lack

of the empirical research on the subject, is stressed by Cody (2012) and Martens *et al.* (2004). Consequently, Martens *et al.* (2004) opine that:

> 'Relatively little is known about how children engage in practices of consumption, or what the significance of this is to their everyday lives and broader issues of social organisation' (p.161).

At the same time, in the mainstream marketing literature, children and brand symbolism are studied through the Piagetian model of child cognitive development (Chaplin & John, 2005; Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Achenreiner & John, 2003; Ji, 2002). Significantly, despite much successful research using the Piagetian model in the marketing field, it still faces criticism from researchers who recognise the importance of CCT as an approach to improve our understanding of how the child relates to brands and this is central to this research. The CCT approach enables the researcher to gain deeper insights into children's lived experiences with brands and recognises the importance of brands for their social and personal lives, rather than solely focusing on the developmental aspects of children as consumers.

Nairn *et al.* (2008) provide reasons for studying children and their brands using the CCT approach. The value of this approach is fully explained in section 2.11 of the Literature Review chapter which identifies the gap that this research seeks to fill.

It is very evident that there is a gap in the marketing literature in that very little is known about children's relationships with their brands from the CCT perspective and this is the main motivation for this study. The adoption of such perspectives requires this research to not rely solely on the Piagetian method to study children and more to study them as consumers in their own right. More specifically, the following epistemological and ontological views have been adopted in this research:

- children are active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children's cultures, while at the same time, contribute to the production of adult society;

- children are able to express their own thoughts, feelings, opinions and own perspectives.

Since children are recognised as active consumers, the research here seeks to establish whether children have meaningful and purposive relationships with brands and if they

do, reveal how these relationships with brands support them in their daily lives. This research is interested in revealing children's own opinions, views and lived experiences with brands. Moreover, this research aims to explore the aspects of their personal and social lives in order to identify the importance of brands within them.

The researcher aims to gain very specific details of children's brands, their relationships with them and explore the significance of them in their lives. Therefore, the following research questions are formulated for this research:

Main research question: What role do brands play in children's lived experiences and identity projects?

In answering the main research question, other questions will be raised. These are:
1. How do children's brands relationships support them in their everyday lives?
2. What is the nature of children's consumer brand relationships?
3. How do brands support children's consumer identity projects?

1.3 Objectives and research methodology

In order to answer the proposed research questions, the following objectives have been identified:
- to explore children's understanding of the symbolic meanings of their brands;
- to gain an understanding of how children use the symbolic meanings of brands in their personal and social lives;
- to gain an understanding of different aspects of children's social and personal lives from their own perspectives (in the context of the school environment, their homes and with their parents and friends).

These objectives have been identified by a careful review of the relevant literature on brand relationship theory, more specifically careful attention has been paid to the origin of the theory and its roots.

This research adopts the interpretivist philosophy where the main focus is on gaining an understanding of the phenomenon and exploring it. The adopted methodology of this research is qualitative because of the epistemological and ontological assumptions of this study, which are exploratory in their nature. This methodology is consistent with

similar research on brand relationship theory (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016; Kates, 2002) and CCT represents the family of the research which is interpretative in its nature (Belk, 2006).

Thirty-one children of both genders participated in the in-depth semi-structured interviews and their ages ranged from 5-9 years. Furthermore, in the context of children, brands and their relationships with these brands, the following characteristics were used for the age selection of the informants: of sufficient age to 1) understand the symbolic meanings of brands, 2) possess a well-established brand awareness and 3), to have the ability to participate in the research. The first and second developed characteristics are part of the preunderstandings of the brand relationship theory which is central to the research here. These characteristics are well explored in the literature review and were considered to be significant in the context of consumer brand relationships theory. The third characteristic is logical for the research which aimed to study children and gain their own opinions and thoughts.

The acquired data was analysed using the open-coding process together with thematic analysis. Furthermore, elements of phenomenological analysis were used to interpret the data because this research was particularly interested in children's own views on their brands and the roles of these brands in their lives.

1.4 Research contribution

Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to the research Findings and Discussion and Analysis respectively and articulate the contribution of this research to scholarship. This research contributes to our understanding of how children as consumers use brands in their daily lives. Therefore, the brand relationship theory is extended beyond well-established research on adults and teenagers. The research identifies ten themes which provide interesting insights of the children's relationships with their brands and explores children's lived experiences with brands, and reveals their importance for their identity projects.

The following ten themes are developed:

1. Brand relationships in supporting children's self-esteem;
2. Brands for children's self-construction: self-image and self-presentation;
3. Symbolic brands as tools for social categorisation;

4. Brands as supporters of socially constructed gender-identity;

5. Brands as supporters of children's social status – the liminal stage;

6. Children's fantasy worlds and their brands;

7. Brands and social embeddedness;

8. Brands and social affiliation;

9. Brands buttressing children's life-projects;

10. Brands as leisure resources.

These ten themes highlight the active position of children as consumers and uncovers the sophisticated nature of their relationships with brands which are meaningful and purposive. This is consistent with Fournier's (2009; 1998) contribution which is applied in the context of adult consumers and not children as consumers. Children, the research here reveals, do have relationships with their brands and these relationships contribute to the personal and social aspects of their lives in much the same way that occurs with adults. One of the unique factors of this thesis is that children's own voices have been heard in order to position them the field of CCT and explore, from their own words, their relationships with brands. These ten themes are explained in detail in the Discussion and Analysis chapters and include such theoretical concepts as self-concept: self-esteem, self-efficacy; self-image, self-presentation; self-expansion theory; model of meaning-transfer; the "cool" concept and the concept of gender and others.

1.5 Thesis organisation

This thesis contains six chapters. They are arranged in the following order: Chapter 1 is an introduction. It provides a general overview of the thesis, clarifies the rationale, justification and motivation of this research; research questions, objectives and methodological orientations; and its research contribution. The following chapter (2) is the Literature Review. This chapter covers the theoretical underpinnings of the research and provides the conceptualisation of the theories which are key to this research. The main theoretical areas which are discussed in this chapter are: (1) consumer culture theory (CCT) which includes brand relationships theory and (2) the child's position in social science research and marketing scholarship.

The third chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the Research Methodology. Here, clarification of the methodological aspects of this research are provided including the adopted research philosophy, methodology, and the sampling strategy. It also clarifies

the details of the pilot study and the main study. Furthermore, this chapter explains the procedures of data analysis and interpretation together with presenting procedures for ensuring reliability and validity of the research.

Chapter 4 is the Findings chapter. It presents ten dominant themes which have been identified and developed from the interviews with the children. These themes explore the symbolic meanings, both individual and shared, which children attach to brands and explores how/why children use them in order to achieve their self-goals and gain support for their identity projects.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the Discussion and Analysis of the Findings. The relevant theoretical underpinnings are discussed in relation to children and their relationships with brands. This chapter reveals the valuable and meaningful roles that brands play in children's daily lives.

The final chapter (6) is the conclusion of the study. This chapter provides an overview of the whole thesis, provides answers to the research questions/objectives which are detailed through the key research findings. Furthermore, this chapter clarifies how this thesis contributes to knowledge, discusses the research limitations, and provides implications for managers and recommendations for future research.

Summary
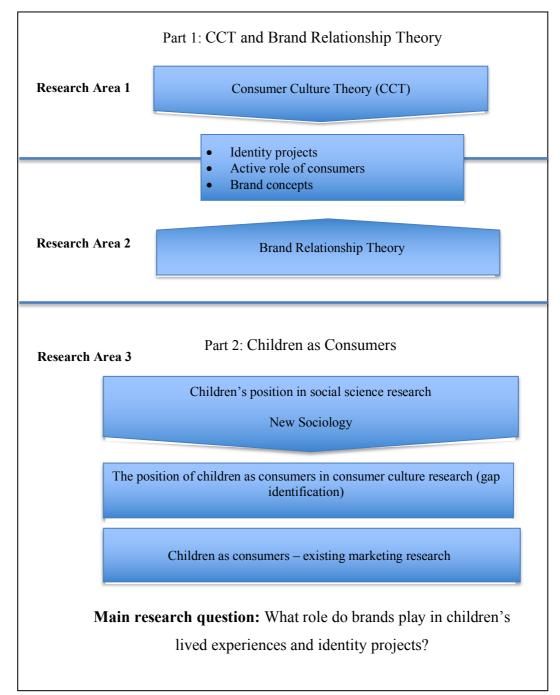
This initial chapter provides an overview of the thesis organistaion. This thesis explores children's relationships with brands and the following chapter, the Literature Review, presents and discusses the relevant theoretical frameworks of this research. The study focuses on children as consumers and explores their relationships with brands, consequently, this research illuminates children's position in the CCT field. Therefore, the identified gap in the literature, which is that very little is known about children as active consumers and how and why they interact with consumer culture and consumerism, is addressed. One of the key aspects of this thesis is that the children's position in the research is based on the principles of New Sociology, consequently, children's own voices are heard in order to investigate their lived experiences with brands and explore their relationships with them. Consequently, this research explains and describes the sophisticated nature of children's brand relationships and reveals the importance of brands in children's social and personal lives.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to reviewing the existing literature of the three relevant theoretical bodies of knowledge. These are presented in Figure 2.1. and this figure reflects the structure of the Literature Review. The various theoretical concepts which uncover the sophisticated nature of CCT, brand relationship theory (Part 1) and children as consumers (Part 2) are reviewed.

Figure 2.1 Structure of the Literature Review chapter

Part 1: CCT and Brand Relationship Theory

Research Area 1   Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

- Identity projects
- Active role of consumers
- Brand concepts

Research Area 2   Brand Relationship Theory

Part 2: Children as Consumers

Research Area 3

Children's position in social science research

New Sociology

The position of children as consumers in consumer culture research (gap identification)

Children as consumers – existing marketing research

Main research question: What role do brands play in children's lived experiences and identity projects?

This framework is based on three main research areas: CCT, brand relationship theory and children as consumers. The chapter begins with Part 1 in which the complex nature of CCT and the nature of brand relationships are explained and reviewed.

Part 2 begins with exploration of children's position in social science research and New Sociology. This is followed by a review of the literature relating to the concept of children as consumers and their position in marketing research. In this section, the children's neglected position in CCT is identified and existing literature on children as active consumers and their brands is reviewed.

Part 1 Consumer culture theory and brand relationship theory

This part describes the complex concept of CCT of which a consumer's identity project is a part. The concept of consumer's identity project is also central to brand relationship theory and consequently, brand relationship theory is an integral part of CCT. Furthermore, within CCT and brand relationship theory, consumers are seen as active individuals in the creation and re-creation of symbolic meanings of brands which they use in the construction of their individual and social identities. This part reviews the relevant literature and explores the nature of CCT and brand relationship theory.

2.1 Consumer culture theory: consumption, culture and consumer culture

From the outset, it is important to clarify the main principles and ideas of CCT in which consumption, culture and consumer culture are studied by scholars from a variety of different perspectives in order to explain consumer behaviour, structure and the nature of the reality and the consumer's world.

Consumer culture research that has been undertaken over the past thirty years has made an important contribution by claiming that, for the consumer, consumption is essential because individuals use it in order to feel and experience the real world and the multiple realities which construct their lives. Moreover, consumption is a very complex phenomenon which has attracted scholars from different disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, business studies, economics and others. Consequently,

the term consumption is perceived as highly complex and multidimensional. Askegaard & Linnet (2011, p.381) explain:

> 'consumption as a term seems to permeate the relations between society and individual, be it in the form of social classification and communications systems, identity formation processes, ritualistic and community building processes…'

The culture phenomenon, on the other hand, has been conceptualised within the CCT arena as a very structured and complex system of the actions, meanings and experiences. Furthermore, CCT research defines consumer culture as 'a social arrangement and as an interconnected system which consumers use in order to create collective meanings and a sense of life and their environments' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.269). Firat & Venkatesh (1995) opine that consumption strongly characterises the Western World and the Western culture claiming that, in order to understand modern society, a consideration of consumer culture is needed where consumer culture constitutes a complex phenomenon which provides symbolic meanings for individuals. Earlier, in 1997 Don Slater brought to our attention that consumption is a cultural process and he provides a valuable definition:

> '…consumer culture denotes a special arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets' (Slater, 1997, p.9).

The author here helpfully provides and summarises several features that are related to the consumer culture and which highlight the very social nature of it. According to Slater (1997, p.31), consumer culture is a culture of consumption; the culture of a market society; in principle, universal and impersonal; an identification of freedom with private choice and private life; an incorporation of needs which 'are, in principle, unlimited and insatiable; is the privileged medium for negotiating identity and status within post-traditional society and represents the increasing importance of culture in the modern exercises of power.'

CCT is wide-ranging in the context of consumption and extends to the 'sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.868). These various aspects have been researched by scholars from different theoretical perspectives

which primarily focus on the dynamic relationships that exist between 'consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.868). CCT, therefore, uncovers and explores the very complex nature of consumption, consumers' experiences, identities and views consumers as highly active and interpretive agents. Interestingly, Arnould & Thompson (2007) clarify that, in labelling CCT, the term theory is used as a conversational term to explore a conceptual range of theoretical perspectives, rather than unify them. Furthermore, the authors claim that the CCT framework aims to facilitate interdisciplinary research and 'systematically link together studies' which are diverse in their methodological stances, theoretical propositions and research contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2007, p.8). The authors propose four main research domains of CCT: (1) consumer identity projects, (2) marketplace cultures, (3) the socio-historic patterning of consumption, and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. They clarify that these domains are interrelated and implicative and therefore, the holistic view is needed on all four dimensions. Interestingly, the first conceptual paper on CCT was published in 2005 by Arnould & Thompson and 10 year later, the authors stress that CCT became a research tradition which explores the complex phenomenon of consumer culture and contributes to 'a large theoretical conversation, rather than constituting a series of one-off case studies' (Arnould & Thompson, 2015, p.3).

Over time, CCT became a very dynamic field of research which communicates and benefits a variety of stakeholders. Moreover, Arnould & Thompson (2015) strongly believe:

> 'that the theoretical pairing of commerce and cultural remains a key component to the consumer culture theoretic and distinctive contributions to the broader interdisciplinary conversation concerning consumption and society' (p.15).

Earlier, Featherstone (2007, p.82) provided a sociologist's view of consumer culture and argues that 'to use the term 'consumer culture' is to emphasise that the world of goods and their principles of structuration are central to the understanding of contemporary society'. Furthermore, the author clarifies that consumer culture provides a complex view on goods as communicators and on consumption as consumption of signs rather than the well-established notions of use/exchange values of goods. Additionally, consumer culture provides consumers with opportunities to differentiate and develop individuality where both of these categories are socially recognised.

Interestingly, CCT scholars predominantly focus on consumer identity projects and they are traditionally driven by the phenomenology, emic description of consumers' everyday lived experiences and this has always proved to be the strength of CCT. However, Askegaard & Linnet (2011, p.397) view the limitation of CCT and that is, they opine, the 'negligence of those (predominantly social) elements of forces shaping consumer lives that are not necessarily part of ordinary consumer experiences'.

Having, provided this broad idea, there are scholars such as Epp & Price (2008), Cova *et al.* (2007), Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) who study consumers not only as identity seekers, as they refer to them, but also as members of a social unions, hence such vibrant research areas as brand community, tribalism, connected consumers has continued to grow in popularity. These research areas reflect the importance of the socially established factors (different forms of lived ideologies), social nature of consumption which exceeds the consumers' lived experiences. In this respect, Askegaard & Linnet (2011, p.36) strongly argue that:

> 'the task of the consumption researcher is to balance the understanding of this face-to-face immediacy and the subjective concerns of the consumer with the way that cultural, societal and historical structures and processes embed these intersubjective dynamics.'

As Arnould & Thompson (2005; 2007) make clear, consumer identity projects is one of the four research domains of CCT. The following section discusses this in detail.

2.2 Identity projects and active consumers

Consumers are active individuals, according to CCT, and as such, they are recognised as contributors to brand creation, specifically in relation to brand meaning. Both marketers and consumers are viewed as co-authors of brand meaning creation who jointly create the reality of the brand. Furthermore, the rapidly growing research area of service marketing also recognises the strong and active consumer's position in the creation of value (Bode & Kjeldgaard, 2017). The active role of consumers is also recognised by Dalli *et al.* (2006, p.87), who argue that, in postmodernity, consumers do not behave 'according to company-generated patterns' and 'they want to experience consumption as a context of personal fulfilment and self-creation'. Additionally, Cova

& Dalli (2009, p. 88) argue that 'post-modern individuals are on a never-ending identity quest, a quest to define the meaning of their lives'. Perez *et al.* (2010, p.220) concur that, from the postmodern perspective, 'consumers are viewed as complex, diverse, and capable of producing cultural meanings through their experiences'.

CCT, therefore, views consumers as interpretative agents who do not necessarily receive the market's messages at face value. From the CCT perspective, consumers are seekers and creators of their own individual identity where the marketplace is a provider of myths and symbols which consumers use to create the narratives of their identity. Moreover, scholars recognise that consumer products are more than simple objects, rather they are, according to Allen *et al.* (2008, p.784) 'meaning-rich tools for personal and social identity construction' and consumers themselves are 'active meaning makers rather than passive recipients of marketing products and communications'. The foundational papers of these ideas, it should be noted, are provided by Belk (1988) and Hirschman & Holbrook (1982). The authors here emphasise the role of possessions for the extended self and highlight the significance of the symbolic/hedonic aspects of consumption experiences for consumers. Therefore, the view of the role of consumers over the last 30 years has changed and now they are seen as playing the role of culture creators and meaning-makers whose interpretations are important for both the marketing practitioner and scholarly theorist. A further significant contribution to the consumer culture theory is made by McCracken (1986, p.71) who developed an informative model which seeks to explain the movements of meanings into consumer goods and argues that 'cultural meaning moves first from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then from these goods to the individual consumer.' Further discussion of identity projects and its definition are provided in the context of brand relationships in section 2.8. The following section explores the concept of brands within the field of CCT.

2.3 The brand concept and CCT

Having explained the sophisticated nature of CCT, it can be argued that it has a diverse range of foci and orientations which are interconnected and can and do influence each other. The research here is carried out in the domain of CCT as it seeks to explain how consumers (children in this research) use products/brands and the meanings provided by marketplace in order to reveal and constitute their own personal/social identities and

social positions (Belk, 1988, 2009; Holt, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Elliot, 1994). Symbolism is one of the concepts which is widely studied by consumption marketing scholars. For example, Dittmar *et al.* (2007) emphasise the significant role that symbolic, experiential and socio-cultural dimensions of consumption play for our better and further understanding of consumer behaviourism. They argue that these dimensions have been recognised in diverse social science disciplines where the prime interests are to analyse links between consumer culture and the broader social cultural, cultural and ideological structures. The interest of Dittmar *et al.* (2007), it is noted, is to gain better understanding of the psychological impact of consumer culture. Furthermore, they argue that consumers do buy goods in order to gain social status, express or acquire identity, regulate emotions and to get closer to an ideal self. Dittmar *et al.* (2007) claim that goods are presented to the consumers as "bridges" towards ideal self through the different symbols of that ideal self (for example: perfect body, good life and others). Additionally, individuals, they argue, locate themselves in a social world through the consumption process. Here, it is significant that products, activities and consumers' beliefs are constructing the narrative of the individual consumer and representing his/her identity. Therefore, consumption can be viewed as a source of the symbolic meanings which consumers need in order to create and develop their self-concept (Wattanasuwan, 2005). At the same time, it is acknowledged that consumers are active participants in the world of consumption. The consumer's world, through the socialisation processes, is creating cultural symbolic meanings which are invested in the product and represented mostly through advertising (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). The importance of the symbolic meaning of brands for consumers has been widely investigated (for example by Levy, 1959; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1988; Patterson & O'Malley, 2006; Fournier, 1998). It is accepted, therefore, in the current marketing literature, that products are being purchased, not only for utility reasons, but also for their symbolic meanings. Wattanasuwan (2005) re-enforces the claim that through consumption and the symbolic meanings of brands, consumers locate themselves in a social world.

The symbolic meanings of brands are associated with the emotional benefits which consumers gain from them and these are viewed as a motivational stimuli. This view on consumers, however, contradicts the rational model of consumer behaviour, which reflects tangible and utilitarian benefits of brands which stimulate consumer behaviour (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Interestingly, McCracken (1989; 1986) proposes that meanings

originate in a culturally constituted world and then are transferred to brands. These meanings, he argues:

> 'flow continually between its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers, and consumers' (McCracken, 1986, p. 71).

McCracken (1989) proposes an interesting idea in relation to the source of the symbolic meanings of brands in that he argues that it can be the reference group usage and the celebrity endorsement that are the sources of symbolic meanings. Consumers therefore, construct their selves through the ownership of brands where the congruity between brand image and self-image is significant and consumers express their selves and create their self-identities through the symbolic meaning of brands. Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998) opine that a consumer uses brands as symbolic resources to construct the self. CCT, therefore, advances our understanding of consumption and consumer behaviour. Furthermore, Holt (2002, p.83) claims, that 'postmodern consumer culture's central tendency [is]: the use of consumer goods to pursue individuated identity projects'. However, the author formulates different definitions of consumer culture and argues that 'the concept of consumer culture refers to the dominant mode of consumption that is structured by collective actions of firms in their marketing activities' (Holt, 2002, p.71). Furthermore, he argues that marketers can be viewed as "engineers" who are controlling and organising individuals' feelings and thoughts through the meaningful brands and complex marketing techniques. Therefore, the modern time of consumerism holds the ideological view that consumer culture, and its main domains (goods, clothes, brands, and others), generates a limited set of identities and, consequently, marketing successfully channels consumer desire. On the other hand, Holt (2002) claims that some individuals are able to take control over provided meanings and particularise them and use them in idiosyncratic ways. According to Holt (2002, p. 88), consumers 'fight the symbolic meanings of marketers by re-inscribing commodities with oppositional meanings through their consumption practices.'

2.4 Brand relationships theory and CCT

Having presented the discourse of the brand in the context of CCT, it is important to recognise that brand relationship theory belongs to this broad research area. Primarily, but not solely, this is because the aspects of consumers' identity projects, the active role

of consumers and the brand phenomenon, are concepts which are shared by these two research streams.

The consumer brand relationship theory was initially developed by Fournier (1998) and is discussed in detail later in this chapter however, it is a meaningful step in this research project to recognise the position of it within CCT and acknowledge its contribution to the CCT research stream as a whole. Fournier (1998) emphasises the importance of the brand relationships for consumers' lives, explores how consumers relate to brands and stresses that these relationships are playing significant roles in individuals' consumer identity projects. One of the strongest and most significant points formulated by Fournier (1998) is based on the notion that the development of the consumer's personality largely depends on relationships in which he/she is involved with and brands can be seen here as an active relationship partner. This idea of Fournier's is also supported with Belk's (1988) notion that an individual's self is the sum of his/her possessions. Furthermore, Escalas & Bettman (2005, p. 387) opine that 'consumers appropriate brand meanings emerging from associations of brands with reference groups to construct their self-concept'. Here we see the consumption of brands (brand personalities) which are in alignment with consumers' own personalities (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Aaker, 1997). Moreover, Mühlbacher *et al.* (2006, p.3) argue 'by engaging in relationships with brands, consumers are considered to take a more active role in the creation of brand meaning' and here we see why brand relationship theory belongs to the CCT concept in that studying it uncovers a complex, purposive and valuable relationship between consumers and their brands. Both consumers' identity projects and the brand phenomena are however, highly complex concepts, and need to be explored in greater detail but before the Literature Review starts to explore the nature of brand relationship theory, it is important to define the term brand and reveal its complex nature.

2.5 Brand as a complex phenomenon

The brand phenomenon is highly complex and has been studied from different perspectives by many researchers such as Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998), Brown, Kozinets & Sherry (2003), Diamond *et al.* (2009), Thompson *et al.* (2006), Swaminathan *et al.* (2007), Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), Cova (1997), Patterson & O'Malley (2006), Bernritter *et al.* (2017) and others. The social perspectives of the

brand phenomenon, it should be noted, primarily focus on the aspect of self-concept/identity formation acquired through the social meanings and the social symbolism of brands which is traditionally shared and used for communication purposes (Ahuvia, 2005; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Belk 1988; Solomon, 1983). For example, Diamond *et al.* (2009), in their socio-cultural research, introduce the term brand *gestalt*. This term characterises the complex structure of the brand phenomenon and includes identity myths, signs, symbols and experiences. The authors emphasise the importance of synergy between these components for an emotionally powerful brand. The postmodern view on a brand recognises consumers as brand co-creators. For example, Brown, Kozinets & Sherry (2003, p.30) argue that, in relation to the retro-brands, consumers can 'be partners in the creation of brand essence and importers of meaning from beyond the market place' and retro brand communities 'play an important role in co-creating brand stories'. Mühlbacher *et al.* (2006), it is noted, also provide a valuable insight into the complexities of the brand phenomena, including its social nature and its consequences for theoretical scholarly research and management practice. They conceptualise a brand in terms of it 'encompassing brand manifestations, brand meaning, and a brand interest group that constructs brand meaning as well as brand manifestations in an ongoing public discourse' (Mühlbacher *et al.,* 2006, p.1).

By way of example, research by Schembri (2009) on the Harley Davison brand reveals that consumers develop relationships with other individuals through their shared values, associations, and interactions. Harley Davison's consumers share associations with this brand (leather and denim jeans which they associate with freedom) and form relationships amongst each other as well as with the brand itself. Additionally, Schembri (2009, p. 1299) emphasises the general role of a brand in the process of socialisation and interaction, which means that the 'brand holds more than the functional value of the product'. Bernritter *et al.* (2017), researching brands online, supports Escalas & Bettman (2005) and further argues that online brand endorsements reflect consumers' activities of identity construction and expression and conclude by saying that 'brands unify their consumers since they all have at least one thing in common, the brand' (Bernritter *et al.,* 2017, p.115).

Another significant element of brand definition which must be included is that concerning benefits which brands provide to the consumers, more specifically, the psychological benefits associated with brand relationships (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

The important categories such as brand association, brand symbolism, brand value and brand meaning, it should be recognised, all contribute to the consumer self-concept. In other words, consumers satisfy their psychological needs by re-enforcing, expressing, defining their self through these main brand categories (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Richins, 1994; Ball & Tasaki, 1992). In the context of this research, Achenreiner & John (2003) argue highly relevant points in that, in the context of child consumption, brands can convey meanings which are symbolic or conceptual. They argue that brands are used by children in order to obtain status, prestige or trendiness.

However, it is argued by many, including Avis (2011) for example, that definitions of a brand are inconsistent and can be conceptualised in a variety of different ways. For example, Brodie & de Chernatony (2009, p.97) observed that 'there never will be a unifying definition of brand but a constantly evolving series of contexts of lenses through which the phenomenon is viewed'. For this research, the Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger (2008) idea of brand phenomenon is viewed as valuable and is adopted in this research. They propose that, from the combination of psychological and sociological research streams, the brand development is 'a complex, contextual, and interactive process within a social system of interrelated, yet diverse actors who, themselves, may become part of the brand' and creation of brands occurs 'through social interaction among all those who are interested in their meaning, their manifestations and others participating in the brand related interaction' (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008, p.15).

The discussion in this section demonstrates the sophisticated nature of the brand phenomenon. Additionally, Aaker's (1997) contribution needs to be acknowledged in order to comprehensively understand the phenomenon and its nature. Aaker (1997) used the concept of animism (which is discussed in section 2.6.1) in order to propose the concept of brand personality which is widely used by scholars and explains the importance of brand symbolism. A fundamental definition is developed by Aaker (1997, p.347) and that is that the brand personality is a 'set of human characteristics associated with a brand'. In her research, Aaker (1997) aims to capture individuals' perceptions of brands' personality traits, consequently, she proposes the theoretical framework which reflects the different dimensions and facets of brand personality. Table 2.1(following) illustrates this framework.

Table 2.1 Brand personality dimensions

Dimensions	Facets
Sincerity	Down to earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful
Excitement	Daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date
Competence	Reliable, intelligent, successful
Sophistication	Upper class, charming
Ruggedness	Outdoorsy, tough

Adapted from Aaker (1997, p. 352)

A supporting definition of brand personality is offered by Zoulay & Kapferer (2003, p.151) who opine that 'brand personality is the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands'. The concept of brand personality helps us to understand how consumers use brands symbolically and also to express their selves, mainly because consumers are able to attach human personality traits to brands (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1997). There are two ways in which brand personality is formed: (1) through the marketers' efforts (brand name, packaging, product and how it is sold) and (2), consumers' own interpretations which are based on their experiences, perceptions and views (Plummer, 2000). Therefore, there are two aspects to the brand personality formation: 'input, that is, what we want consumers to think and feel, and out-take, what consumers actually do think and feel' (Plummer, 2000, p.80).

While discussing the concept of the brand personality, there are two additional concepts which need to be acknowledged and explained. These are: brand image and brand awareness. These concepts define the notion of brand knowledge, which is conceptualised by Keller (1993, p.3) as 'consisting of a brand node in memory to which a variety of associations are linked'. Furthermore, Keller (1993, p.2) provides the following definitions: 'brand awareness relates to brand recall and recognition performance by consumers' and 'brand image refers to the set of associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in memory.'

Interestingly, Lin (2010) argues that brand personality is sustained through the categories of brand image, brand associations and brand attributes. Keller (1993) defines brand attributes as set of thoughts consumers hold about product/services which can be divided into product-related attributes (physical characteristics of the product)

and non-product-related attributes (usage/user imagery, information about price and others). The concept of brand personality is central in the brand relationship theory as Fournier (1998), in her seminal work, advocates that consumers form relationship with brands in a similar manner to how they form relationships with other individuals. This idea is developed further by other scholars and this is discussed fully in section 2.6, 2.7 and 2.8.

As a consequence of the above discussion, the sophisticated nature of the brand phenomenon is acknowledged and it is central for the understanding of brand relationship theory which is discussed comprehensively in the following section.

2.6 The brand relationship concept and its origin

Fournier's (1998) classic paper *Consumers and their Brand: developing relationship theory in consumer research* is one of the essential papers for this research. Central to Fournier's research is the use of animism and interpersonal theories. Each of these concepts will be explored in full. The key and unique contribution of Fournier (1998) is based upon the relationship metaphor which she uses in order to explore the relationships that consumers have with brands. Fournier (1998) makes clear in her paper that the adoption of animism and the fundamental principles of relationships are useful for our understanding of the relationships between people and brands. It is important to note that Fournier moved into deeper understanding of the consumer brand relationships where these relationships are considered to be very similar to the relationships between individuals – metaphorically speaking. Fournier (1998) emphasises the importance of the brand relationships for consumers' lives and explores how consumers relate to brands. She strongly emphasises that consumers select brands because of the meanings which they bring in their lives. Furthermore, brands can be seen as active relationship partners which hold human characteristics, consequently, through the processes of interactions 'consumers are able to use brands in various ways, both functional and emotional' (Huang, 2012, p.244*).*

2.6.1 Animism as a basis for the brand relationships concept

Edward Tylor first formulated the term animism in the late 19th century. He based this term on the Latin word *anima,* meaning *soul* and argued that 'animism is the minimum definition of religion' (Tylor, 1871, p. 377). More simply, the concept of animism refers to the set of beliefs of souls and spirits which people assign to nature or objects (Tylor, 1871). Additionally, animism has been identified as a 'life factor' (Gilmore, 2004, p.2; Tylor, 1871). The scholars who have developed theories of animism suggest that any individual needs to animate objects in order to interact and communicate with the non-material world (Nida & Smalley, 1959; Gilmore, 1919; McDougall, 1911; Tylor, 1871). The idea of animism has, at its core, the notion that objects have souls and this has long been recognised in relation to products and, hence, the validity of the concept (Gilmore, 1919). Humans, by their nature, tend to animate the world around them, opines Guthrie (1995). Blackston (1993) develops a model where brands and consumers are seen as parts of a single system: brand relationships. Importantly, he emphasises the co-equivalent role of these partners in this system and makes the point that this relationship is very similar to the relationships between individuals. The consumer's perception of the brand's attitude is identified as a key factor for successful brand relationships. It is further argued that consumers are comfortable to personify brands, which means that brands can be seen as a relationship partner. Additionally, as long as the analogy is made, and a brand is seen as a relationship partner, it is important to recognise that individuals do not just simply elaborate the information about other people, they create complex relationships which include cognitive, affective and behavioural processes. Consequently, Balckston (1993, p.116) raises such questions as: 'what do the consumers think that the brand thinks of them?' This question re-enforces the notion that brands can hold human characteristics which are important for consumers. It is important to understand here that the extension of the idea of the brand-personality brings us to the phenomena of brand relationships (Blackston, 1992). The category of anthropomorphism is also actively used in marketing research mutually with the category of animism in order to explain the processes of animation of product or brand (Puzakova *et al.,* 2009). The notion that brands hold human characteristics is developed further with the use of such terms as brand personality and it is becoming central in much research, especially amongst those interested in the brands and their role as a relationship partner (Aaker, 1997). In this context, Guthrie (1995) investigates the ideas of animism and anthropomorphism in detail and concludes that animism can best be

viewed as humans attributing life to non-living objects, and anthropomorphism as humans attributing human characteristics to the non-human.

The theory of animism, therefore, refers to the idea that individuals tend to humanise inanimate objects in order to simplify relations with the nonmaterial world (Fournier, 1998; Fournier *et al*., 2012). The theory of animism is used by Fournier (1998) in order to give inanimate objects, more specifically brands, human characteristics, consequently she argues that brands can be seen as a vital participant in the consumer brand relationships. Fournier (1998, p.344) claims that 'one way to legitimize the brand-as-partner is to highlight ways in which brands are animated, humanized, or somehow personalized'.

Through the main points of the animistic idea, Fournier (1998) generates the notion that consumers are attaching personality characteristics to the brands and very often associating them with the particular person who has been responsible for advertising the particular brand. Furthermore, she argues, consumers might associate a particular brand with the past where the product has been continuously used by those known, such a relative, or the brand-object has been received as a gift and consequently holds the special character of the giver. Here, it is important to recognise that the personal characteristics of the giver might perfectly fit with the brand personality. Consequently, the brand possesses the spirit of the giver and it is delivered to the receiver through the gift (Fournier, 1998). Additionally, the brand spirit and consumer associations associated with it are supporting the idea of the brand animation and, consequently, the notion of the brand as a vital member of the relationship. Fournier (1998, p.345) argues that a brand itself is a set of the different perceptions which consumers have in their minds and a brand does not have 'objective existence at all: it is simply a collection of perceptions held in the mind of the consumer'.

Solomon *et al.* (2006) stress that consumers humanise the brand as they accept the advertisers' efforts to animate and personify the brand. Aggarwal & McGill (2007) concur that people give the human characteristics to animals as well as to artifacts which refers to the idea that people do actually humanise their possessions (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007, p. 468). Also, the authors provide an example: 'people sometimes see their cars as loyal companions, going so far as to name them'. This further supports the

idea that people have relationships with brands. Moreover, the authors here argue that the:

> 'ability of consumers to anthropomorphize a product and their consequent evaluation of that product depends on the extent to which that product is endowed with characteristics congruent to the proposed human schema' (p.468).

Fitzsimons *et al.* (2008), based on research within the social psychology discipline, where individual behaviour can be affected by the associations they have with other people, argue that individuals' automatic behaviour can be evoked by brands and their characteristics. More specifically, they claim that individuals who are exposed to the Apple brand behave more creatively, and those exposed to the Disney brand behave more honestly. However, the extent of brand perception as a human can be vary. For example, Aggarwall & McGill (2012) make the assumption that iconic brands, which have been the main focus of Fitzsimons *et al.* (2008), are normally perceived more as "people", consequently, they argue, that such brands are more likely to affect an individual's behaviour.

Puzakova *et al*. (2009) argue firmly that people form stronger relationships with brands they perceive to be as human, a view further developed by Aggarwall & McGill (2012) who extend the notion by demonstrating that anthropomorised brands extend into the social sphere and individuals' responses to such brands tend to be similar to the responses which people have to other people who hold similar human characteristics. Importantly, these responses tend to be goal-directed and driven by desire for successful social interaction. Brand associations, therefore, dictate and provide certain personality characteristics which individuals hope to achieve (Aggarwall & McGill, 2012).

Having clarified some of the ideas and positions in relation to animism and the anthropomorphisation of brands, there are also concerns in relation to the latter. For example, Grétry (2017) in line with Kim *et al.* (2016), identify the negative effects of brand anthropomorphization on consumer's actual experiences with brands. Therefore, this section validates the central idea that should a consumer anthropomorphize a brand, they are more likely to form a strong relationship with it. Moreover, the concept of animism is used by Aaker (1997) in order to develop the concept of brand personality and its significance for the self-concept formation, which addressed in section 2.5 above in more detail.

Despite the fact the phenomenon of animism, and consequently the concept of a brand as a relationship partner are significant for our understanding of the brand relationship concept, Fournier (2009) makes a significant clarification. She argues that the identification of brand relationships' potential existence is not based on the brands' human characteristics because all brands interact and communicate with consumers through the marketing mix which forms the basis for such relationships. She further clarifies, that potential for the formation of brand relationships is based on how 'sensitive [the brand is] to the person's life context' Fournier (2009, p.7).

Additionally, to understand the nature of the brand relationship concept, and the significance of these relationships for the individuals' lives, a deeper understanding of social relationships is needed. Many of the theories adopted by the brand relationship field have, it is noted, been taken from the sociology and psychology disciplines.

2.6.2 Interpersonal relationships

From the outset, it is important to define the relationship concept in order to fully understand the brand relationship idea. Towards the end, this section provides the definition of relationships in the context of brand relationship theory as formulated by Fournier (1998) and Ji (2002). Furthermore, social relationship characteristics and types are explored. There is a considerable challenge in defining relationship and Kelley *et al.* (1983, p.1) posit that 'relationships with others lie at the very core of human existence' and it is highly relevant to state here that social relationships and social interactions are deeply integrated in our everyday lives and can rarely be excluded from them. These relationships appear between different groups, at different levels and exist in different forms. Additionally, relationships provide different sorts of benefits for the participants of these relationships. The context in which relationships occur is also important as they can affect, and be affected by, that particular context (Fournier *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, the relationship phenomenon is viewed as highly complex and extremely challenging to define. Kelley *et al.* (1983) formulate the most widely accepted and influential discussion of a relationship, argue Reis & Rusbult (2004) and Aron *et al.* (1991). Kelley *et al.* (1983) focus on the diverse influences which individuals have on one another over extended periods of time. They argue that a relationship exists if it exists over time and must be both frequent and strong. Furthermore, they argue that interdependency is a significant category of the interpersonal relationship which cannot be separated from the

relationship phenomenon. Reis & Rusbult (2004) opine that interdependency defines the degree of dependency of individuals in the relationship, constitute the power influence and reflects interactions both congenial and less congenial. Denzin (1970, p.67) puts forward a definition that 'a relationship exists between two or more people when those people engage in recurrent forms of either symbolic or co-present interaction'.

Furthermore, Denzin (1970) argues that parties which are involved in relationships must have the same or a similar set of definitions of each other which they are sharing. Additionally, Acitelli, Duck & West (2000) argue that all relationships are unique to the parties involved. Therefore, because of these different aspects and characteristics of the relationship concept, it is difficult to define them. It is important to bring to attention that the interpersonal relationship literature focuses more on the nature of the relationship as opposed to providing a technical definition of the relationship itself.

Hinde (1995), whilst seeking to define relationships as a connection, suggests that they should have several significant characteristics. The first characteristic refers to the notion that there are active and interdependent partners in the relationships and exchange amongst them must have a reciprocal nature. The second characteristic highlights the purposive behaviour of the participants which creates meanings for them. Furthermore, Hinde (1995) argues that relationships have a diversity of forms and each of these forms provides a variety of benefits for participants. The final characteristic emphasises that relationships are changing and evolving in the process of interaction and also under changes in the environment where they are taking place. It is important to note here that Fournier's (1998) research design, analysis, findings and arguments are based on these characteristics. Consequently, Fournier (1998) formulates her definition of the relationships which she then uses in order to explain the consumer brand relationships. The Fournier (1998) definition is:

> 'Relationships are constituted of a series of repeated exchanges between two parties known to each other; they evolve in response to these interactions and to fluctuations in the contextual environment' (p.346).

Specifically, for this research, the definition of the child-brand relationship is provided by Ji (2008) who argues that children's brand relationships are a:

'voluntary or imposed bond between a child and a brand characterized by a unique history of interactions and is intended to serve developmental and social-emotional goals in the child's life' (p.605).

Interestingly, this definition is taken and extended by the Rodhain & Aurier (2016), who recognise the importance of social interactions for the formation of children's brand relationships (interactions with peers, teachers and parents). The interpersonal relationship theories categorise (1) the types of the relationship through the different types of bond which joins the participants of the relationship, and (2) through the nature of the benefits which the participants receive from these relationships.

Kelly & Thibaut (1978) provide the theory of interdependency which is a logical development and extension of the theory of social exchange. This theory highlights the dynamic aspects of interpersonal interaction, where outcomes for individuals in the relationships can be chararcterised through such categories as the received rewards and the costs incurred by individuals. The received rewards category refers to any factors which are pleasurable and/or gratifying for participants, whereas costs refers to the categories which deal with the performance of behaviour. The category of "interdependency" is important for our understanding of the relationship concept and consequently, the concept of the brand relationships. Kelley *et al*. (1983) argue that individuals depend on one another because it supports their realisation of their lives and provides life comfort which is a central fact of the human condition. It is argued that interdependence exists between individuals which is different from the previous approach where scholars explain the individual's behaviour in the relationship through the properties which reside within individuals themselves (Le & Agnew, 2003). It is particularly important to recognise that without interdependency between participants, the interpersonal relationships among them do not exist (Le & Agnew, 2003; Kelly & Thibaut, 1978). Reis & Rusbult (2004) claim that when the level of interdependency is relatively strong, it is appropriate to move to the category of "close relationship". Aron *at el*. (1991, p.250) interestingly describe and view the close relationships 'as including other in the self'. Aron *et al*. (1995) explain that close relationships refer to the integration into the self of such elements as perspectives of other individuals, others' resources and characteristics. Consequently, it is suggested that the self is expanded if the individual includes elements of the other individual into his/her self. Additionally, in

close relationships individuals treat one another as if they are parts of themselves (Aron *et al*., 1995).

Significantly, the emotional component cannot be separated from any type of relationship. Emotions are important for our understanding of the relationship concept as they are the basis for them (Duck, 1986). Additionally, Duck (1986) argues that emotional experience creates and sustains relationships. Also, the context in which relationships appear is important as it influences the expression and interpretation of an individual's emotions. Therefore, different social and relational contexts need to be considered in order to gain better understanding of the relationship context (Duck, 1998). Therefore, the relationship phenomenon is complex and can take variety of types and forms. Wish *et al*. (1976, p.409) conducted research among dyadic relationships and this research is based on the following assumption: 'dyadic relations are meaningful perceptual-cognitive units that can be evaluated and compared with one another'. Furthermore, the authors, through the multidimensional scaling analysis, summarise and interpret four dimensions of the people's perceptions of typical interpersonal relationships and of the relationships in which they are involved. The first dimension is based on the degree of conflict in the relationship and Wish *et al*. (1976) interpret these dimensions as "cooperative and friendly" *versus* "competitive and hostile". In other words, this dimension refers to whether or not it is positive or negative (de Chernatony, 2010; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996). "Husband-wife" relationships here would be an example of the positive relationships, whereas "guard-prisoner" is a typical example of negative relationships (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996; Wish, *et al*., 1976). The second dimension interprets the power between two individuals in the relationships and Wish *et al*. (1976) argue here that this dimension can be easily interpreted as "equal *versus* unequal" relationships or, in the other words, the "power symmetry" dimension (de Chernatony, 2010; Iacobucci & Ostrom 1996). Iacobucci & Ostrom (1996) provide the following example: a "parent-child" dyadic relationship is asymmetric in their roles, whereas "close friends" are more equal. "Intensity" is the third dimension which is recognised by Wish *et al*. (1976), here the term of intensity can be considered also as a frequency of interactions (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996, p.55). This dimension refers to "intense versus superficial". The classic example here is "casual-acquaintances" (Wish *et al*., 1976; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996). The final dimension is "informal *versus* formal". To clarify, informal/formal relationships refer to such relationships as parent-child and teacher-student respectively (Wish *et al*., 1976). It is important to emphasise

here that these four dimensions can be used to characterise dyadic relationships and that they can be described as high or low in the context of each dimension (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996). The nature of these characteristics is very different, therefore, there are many different types of dyadic relationships with different roles of participants. Significantly, Iacobucci & Ostrom (1996) examine these four dimensions and conclude that they are acceptable in the business context. More specifically, the authors here argue that such characteristics as closeness, valence, asymmetry and formality are beneficial for our understanding of dyadic relationships in the business context. However, Iacobucci & Ostrom (1996) argue further that the combination of these characteristics/properties for different sets of dyads is also different. Significantly, these dimensions are actively used and applied by Fournier (1998) in her development of brand relationship theory.

De Chernatony (2010) and Gummesson (1999) review different characteristics of relationships which can be seen as a basis for relationships differentiation: (1) extent to which parties collaborate; (2) degree of commitment between parties; (3) extent to which trust is engendered and risk reduced; (4) whether one party has greater power; (5) longevity of relationship; (6) degree to which there are frequent interactions; (7) whether intensive or superficial; (8) extent to which there is physical, mental or emotional closeness; (9) whether formal or informal; (10) degree of openness and (11) whether or not it is routinised.

This section has explored social-relationship characteristics and types however, it is important to gain an understanding of why individuals form relationships. The understanding of these theoretical aspects is important for our understanding of brand relationship theory. The following section explores and clarifies individual's motivations to from social relationships.

2.6.3 Individuals' motivations to form social relationships

It is very important to understand why people interact and create different types of relationships. The "affiliation" phenomenon cannot be ignored in the context of relationships as it has been identified as one of the basic dimensions of interpersonal behaviour which refers to "emotional closeness". The affiliation can be defined as 'the tendency to seek out the company of others, even if we do not feel particularly close to

them' (Hewstone *et al.,* 2008, p.198). Furthermore, Hewstone *et al.* (2008) provide three motives for people's affiliation: social comparison, anxiety reduction and social support. Social comparison theory refers to the idea that people are affiliating with others in order to compare themselves to others and consequently, learn more about their feelings and appropriate social behaviour. Anxiety reduction refers to the emotional support and comfort which might be offered and gained by one individual to another. Social support is another motivation for affiliation. This motivation is divided into four elements: emotional support, appraisal support, informational support and instrumental support (Hewstone *et al.,* 2008).

Hewstone *et al.* (2008) opine that attachment theory is important in the context of anxiety reduction. Attachment theory has been extensively explored and developed by Bowlby (1969) and his contribution to scholarship on the topic is highly significant. Bowlby (1969, 1973) opines that a child has an inborn and instinctive need to form an attachment, or bond, to a primary figure such as a parent/ caregiver at an early age (before 2 - 2.5 years old). Failure to develop such an attachment at an early age can, he argues, have negative consequences in terms of psychological development in later life. Attachment theory is one of the central bodies of knowledge in the interpersonal relationships field. The ideas of this theory are based upon two fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that interpersonal relationships are formed by people in their lives and are influenced by the interaction with the parent/caregiver which they had in early childhood. The second assumption is that 'attachment behaviour characterises human beings throughout life' meaning that it is a permanent feature (Duck, 1993, p.30). Furthermore, research demonstrates that different types of relationships are guided by the theoretical principles of the attachment itself. Additionally, two dimensions of the attachment style have been developed: 1) the anxiety style which is based on the individual's view of self and 2) the avoidance style which is based on the view of others. Significantly, the attachment style potentially might influence the type of relationship which a person would engage in, and a person's ability to form attachments in the interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Bowlby (1973) puts forward the idea that a person's self-image can be shaped by the attachment experience and this attachment experience can be used as a source of information to learn about themselves. Research on attachment theory has been further developed and the emotional bond has been examined between romantic partners and between infant and caregiver, and it is stressed that the emotional bond in these two relationships has

the same motivational system (Hazan & Shaver,1987). Additionally, other researchers identify that other types of relationships and emotional bonds can be ruled by the basic principles of the attachment theory (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997).

Bowlby's (1969, 1973) important contribution to developmental psychology and consequently, to brand relationship theory, by developing attachment theory, was extended by this author and his colleagues and associates to further our understanding of the process of loss. Bowlby, it should be noted here, was influenced by Freud's 1917 work entitled "Mourning and Melancholia" in which the author investigated how individuals respond to the death/ loss of a 'loved person' (Freud, 1917, p.243). Bowlby's research was also particularly interested in adaptive responses to loss in terms of how individuals cope with losing an individual with whom the person in question had a very close relationship such as a parent/ caregiver or sibling. Such an adaptive emotional response, or set of adaptive responses, is referred to by Bowlby & Parks (1970) as grief, or the grieving process. In the context of grief, Bowlby & Parkes (1970) opine that a four-stage process ensues: Shock and Numbness; Yearning and Searching; Despair and Disorganisation; and Reorganisation and Recovery.

In the initial stage of grief, the Shock and Numbness stage, the griever enters a period in which the feeling of loss seems unreal and impossible to accept and can frequently be denied altogether. Physical, as opposed to mental distress can be present in the most severe cases as a consequence. Failing to pass through this initial stage can have severe consequences with the griever unable to accept and come to terms with his/ her emotions and rationalise their subsequent emotional response. In the most severe cases, the griever will emotionally "shut down". Having passed through the initial stage, the griever enters the Yearning and Searching stage. During this period the griever is acutely aware of the loss in his/ her life and ongoing life without them seems no longer an impossibility. The griever may suffer loss of appetite, bouts of sobbing, anxiety and tension, irritability and concentration loss. The griever will, however, slowly begin the quest to fill the void created by the loss. The loss of the person remains a central thought however, and to others, the griever may appear pre-occupied with the lost individual as the griever continually seeks ways of identifying with the person in order to gain psychological closeness with them. Bowlby & Parkes (1970) argue that failing to satisfactorily pass through the Yearning and Searching stage can result in the griever spending their life continually searching for a means of filling the void left by the loss

and remaining preoccupied with the lost person. Having passed through the Yearning and Searching stage, the griever enters the Despair and Disorganisation stage in which the loss has finally come to be accepted and that the fact that the change has occurred will be permanent. During this period the griever will experience emotions of despair and hopelessness and seek answers to questions such as why has this happened to me? Bouts of anger, inform Bowlby & Parks (1970), are not uncommon during this stage. It appears to the griever that life may never get better and the griever may withdraw from others. Bowlby & Parkes (1970) opine that failing to pass through this stage can have serious consequences in terms of the griever suffering bouts of depression and anger as they view the future negatively and with a sense of hopelessness. The final stage of the grieving process is the Re-organisation and Recovery stage and in this period, the griever finally begins to start feeling more positive about the future. The griever may cease to withdraw from others and re-establish trust. That is not to say the griever no longer suffers the emotional consequences of the loss, but according to Bowlby & Parkes (1970), the loss gradually recedes as the griever "let's go" of the deceased and the bereaved no longer remains central in their thoughts as they investigate the future without them.

Whilst Bowlby dedicated a significant part of his extensive research life to the notion of loss/bereavement and associated adaptive responses, he was confronted by criticism because his research, for example, failed to reflect loss/ grieving in the wider cultural context. Valentine (2009) for example, points out that in Japan grievers are not encouraged to break the emotional bonds with the deceased and that in other cultures "letting go" of the deceased is considered disrespectful and is discouraged. Parkes, Laugani & Young (1997), however, investigate responses to loss and grieving processes in the wider cultural context and go some way towards filling this gap. That said, Bowlby's contribution to adaptive responses to loss and grieving remains of great importance to the medical world, particularly in terms of counselling those affected by the loss.

Perhaps not surprisingly, researchers involved in consumption behaviour such as those investigating brand relationships, place significant emphasis on attachment theory as a means to help explain such relationships, but largely ignore the concept of loss. This is perhaps unsurprising because the term "loss" as used by Bowlby and colleagues is specifically concerned with the loss caused by the death of a living person with whom

the loser has had a close, emotional relationship as opposed to the emotional response to the loss of a brand or other non-living entity. The primary contribution of Bowlby, it should be noted, is to counselling individuals who have suffered loss as a result of death of a 'loved person', to used Freud's (1917, p.243) specific term.

Thus far, the Literature Review here has explored the sophisticated nature of CCT and clarified that brand relationship theory belongs to CCT. Also, the identity project, active role of consumers and concept of branding are identified as central for these theoretical underpinnings. Furthermore, the Literature Review uncovered the insights of the interpersonal relationships concept which is important in order to gain an understanding of the brand relationship concept. The brand relationship theory is central for this research, therefore the following section illuminates and explores this concept.

2.7 The brand relationship concept

This chapter has reviewed the literature exploring and discussing the various elements upon which the concept of brand relationships is based. It now focuses on relationships between individuals and brands and explores the concept of brand relationships as developed by Fournier (1998).

The central contribution made by Fournier (1998) is that a brand is an active and vital partner and is crucial for the further development and conceptualisation of the brand relationship theory. This is because it is developed through the application of the interpersonal relationship theories to the consumer-brand/object interaction. Fournier (1998, p.343) argues that interpersonal relationship theories can help answer such questions as 'why, and in what forms, consumers seek and value on-going relationships with brands' in their everyday lives. Specifically, Fournier (1998) uses four fundamental characteristics of the relationships in the interpersonal domain as guides for her research. She claims the following characteristics are present: reciprocal exchange as an integral part of the relationship; that relationships have a purposive nature; and relationships are multiplex and a dynamic phenomenon. Fournier (1998) stresses that two of the most important elements of the relationship are interdependence and interaction. According to the psychological view, these elements are significant for the relationship's existence and its constitutions. It is important to note here that Fournier, by using terms of 'interdependency' and 'interaction', highlights the

purposive, long-lasting nature of the relationships and the opportunity for the participant to generate mutual influence on each other. This is clearly recognised in the psychology field. Therefore, within the idea and justification of a brand as a vital partner in consumer brand relationships, and a fundamental characteristic of the relationship, Fournier (1998) claims that the brand relationship itself is important for the consumers' lives as they add meanings to them, help one achieve personal goals, and even help us to solve problems encountered in our lives. Moreover, Gobe (2001) claims that:

> 'consumers today want to establish a multifaceted holistic relationship with that brand, and this means they expect the brand to play a positive, proactive role in their lives' (p. xxi, 21).

Fournier & Yao (1997) argue that the nature of the relationships and connections which customers have with their brands is very complex and can be based on commitment and fidelity, feelings of love and passion, intimacy and personal revelation. There are three contextual sources of the meanings: psychological, sociocultural and relational, which have been identified by Fournier (1998). These sources characterise and shape the importance for the person who is involved in that particular relationship (Fournier, 1998).

The interpersonal relationship phenomena are very broad and is approached by scientists from a variety of disciplines. These disciplines include sociology, psychology, marketing and others. Significantly, in the marketing scientific area, consumer brand relationships can be divided into two groups: 1) consumer-brand-consumer relationships, and 2) consumer-brand relationships. Fournier (1998) makes an important contribution by applying the complex construction of the interpersonal relationships theories to the relationships which people have with the brand. Subsequently, she develops different types of consumer brand relationships. These relationship types can be divided into different categories (see Table 2.2 following).

Table 2.2 Fournier's (1998) brand relationship types

Friendship	Marriage	Dark side relationships	Temporally oriented relationships
Compartmentalised friendships, Childhood buddies, Best friends, Casual friends.	The marriage of convenience, Committed partnership, Arranged marriage.	Dependency, Enmity, Enslavement, Secret affairs.	Courtships, Flings.

Source: Adapted from Fournier (1998)

Gifford Jr. (1997, p.9) claims that 'these relationships vary as widely as human relationships do, and can be, for example intimate or superficial, affectionate or contemptuous, casual or committed'. Each type of the relationships has different meanings for the participants' daily lives and provides different benefits (Fournier, 1998).

Since Fournier's (1998) publication, which conceptualised the brand relationship theory, this concept continues to be developed by different scholars researching different perspectives of the theory. For example, the idea of brand community was developed and introduced by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001). Also, different types and dimensions of consumer brand relationships were developed and recommended, for example by Aggarwal (2004) who explores exchange versus communal relationships. Clark & Mills (1993) explain and discuss the concept of "exchange" and "communal relationships". These types of relationships have been used by Aggarwal (2004) in order to help us better understand and explain consumer brand relationships. The social psychology literature differentiates between these two types of relationships by considering "economic" and "social" factors. More specifically, they are used to better explain the benefits which participants of the relationships receive, and their motivation for providing them. In exchange relationships members benefit from each other and getting something in return is their prime motivation. Whereas in communal relationships the benefits are provided by members in response to needs. Members here are motivated by the feelings of responsibility for the other's welfare. Also, norms of behaviour would be a distinguishing factor for the communal and exchange

relationships. For instance, business partners in their relationships would be expecting monetary payments for providing help to each other. Conversely, family members do not have such expectations (Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). Consequently, Aggarwal (2004, p.89) concludes that norms of behaviour which exist in the social interactions are used by consumers to 'guide their behaviour and their evaluations of the brand'. Moreover, Aggarwal (2004) and Aggarwal & Law (2005) suggest that an adherence to, or a violation of, the relationship norms which exist in the social interactions, influences the consumer's brand evaluations. Aggarwal (2004, p.100) claims that 'the relationship metaphor offers a great opportunity to explore the complex but fascinating world of consumer-brand interactions'.

Furthermore, development and understanding of the concept of the brand has been carried out through the application of the different theoretical frameworks such as attachment theory (which is explained in section 2.6.3 above). For example, Thomson (2006) and Thomson & Johnson (2006) identify that the interpersonal style of attachment can be used in order to explain the consumer's relationships with brands. Thomson (2006, p.104) uses the term 'human brand' which is 'a term that refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications' and clarifies that the attachment to brands is more intense when these brands enhance feelings of autonomy and relatedness, boost individuals' self-esteem and feelings of pleasure-stimulation (fun, excitement). Swaminathan & Dommer (2012) further argue that consumer brand relationship theory and interpersonal relationships have similarities and share common themes. Furthermore, consumer brand relationships "borrows" various frameworks from the interpersonal relationship theories and successfully develops interesting and valuable insights of the brand relationship theory. Swaminathan & Dommer (2012, p.22) opine that 'it appears that consumers engage in different types of brand relationship with varying types of brands to achieve various personal and social goals'. For example, an interesting contribution and extension of Fournier's typology of brand relationships is made by Kates (2000) who recognises the importance of context for the formation of brand-meanings and, consequently, for the formation of the brand relationships. He argues that brands play a significant and facilitating role in the complex system of meanings within the gay community. In this case, consumers gain both utilitarian and social benefits. Kates (2000, p.506) explores and puts forward three relationships forms: 'community members; political allies and political enemies'.

Fournier (2009) indicates fifty-two facets which are characterising and differentiating consumers' brand relationships. For example: warm/cold, active/inactive, emotional/not emotional and others. Furthermore, she proposes three tenets which summarise the existing ideas of this concept and these are the main drivers for this research. These tenets are:

1) Relationships are purposive, involving at their core, the provision of meanings to the person who engages with them;

2) Relationships are a multiplex phenomena: they range across several dimensions and take many forms;

3) Relationships are process phenomena: they evolve and change over a series of interactions and in response to contextual change.

More relevant to this research, the typology of teenagers' brand relationships is developed by Aledin (2012). Important to the research here, he highlights the lack of research investigating the connections between children/ adolescents and brands and he seeks to fill this gap by carrying out research amongst adolescents. However, at the same time, the connections between adults and brands is well developed in the literature and evidence is presented above. Aledin (2012) brings together such categories as brand meanings and brand motives in order to explore the psychological and socio-cultural aspects of brands. Furthermore, the self-construction, self-expression and self-esteem and daily social interactions are taken into consideration. Drawing on the research of Richins (1994), he highlights the significance of meanings of possessions which are divided between public meanings and private meanings. Aledin (2012), whilst acknowledging the contribution of Fournier (1998), uses "self-brand connection" as an alternative approach to study the link between brands and consumers. The self-brand principal refers to the notion that brands are connected to the individual self, where the brand is viewed as an important and meaningful component of the self-narrative (Aledin, 2012; Escales, 2004). Consequently, the role of brands in teenagers' lives, and the teenagers' brand-relationships are explored and six new types are developed. These are: social filter; match-maker; mature friend; reputation wrecker; a shoulder to lean on; and mood sensor. This research concludes that these relationship types:

'… imply what kinds of brands teenagers use as well as how and why they use them. Teenagers use their brands in a highly purposive manner, they help master their daily interaction, seek connectedness and acceptance as well as deal with their self-esteem' (Aledin, 2012, p.275).

Recently, Confos *et al.* (2016) clarify that on-line media and digital platforms are one of the socialisation agents for children/young consumers (the authors do not clarify the age group) which aids their development as consumers. Furthermore, they emphasise that in a digital context:

> 'brands can be interactive partners in a relationship, as consumers can converse and share with brands, and moreover brands can talk through posts and tweets (Brand as Person) directly' (Confos *et al.,* 2016, p. 2008).

They argue that the branded communication strategies which organisations use in on-line environments immerse children in the brand context and the 'act of liking a brand on a Facebook is a declaration of a consumer's approval or even affection for the brand' (Confos *et al.,* 2016, p. 2008). Thus, the potential for the formation of child-brand relationships occurs. The engagement with brands on-line provides children with the feeling that the brand is linking her/him with others through the "social presence". This could be perceived as one of the social benefits for children as consumers. Despite the fact that children have limited financial capabilities which could influence the potential of the child-brand relationship formation directly (Ji, 2008), Confos *et al.* (2016, p. 2008) opine: 'young consumers can experience things online that they may never be able to experience in the real world.'

Staying in the sphere of child-brand relationships, Ji (2008) develops a conceptual framework of the phenomenon which is based upon such categories as motivation, opportunity and ability which are identified as factors for potential to form the relationships with brands. Ji (2002) argues that children do have relationships with brands and she provides very similar research to the original of Fournier (1998) where a typology of children's brand relationships is developed.

It is important to stress however, that this thesis differs from the work of Ji (2002, 2008) in that the child in this research project is seen as an autonomic individual in the context of relationships which they have with brands. It is the very positioning of the child in this research project that will close the gap in the literature of the neglected position of children in consumer culture research, earlier identified by Cook (2008) and Martens *et al*. (2004). The existing literature on children as consumers and branding/brand relationships are discussed later in this chapter.

Avery *et al.* (2014) stress the significance of the brand relationships concept for business success and argue that businesses have an industrial view on consumer relationships, where demographic data is correlated with purchase information. However, this view is very limited and does not provide deep understanding of consumer relationship expectations and relationship needs. Such an understanding would undoubtedly be of commercial value to an organisation and provide an opportunity to manage these relationships leading to commercial gains. The brand relationship phenomenon suggests that (some) consumers want more than simple economic exchange relationships with brands and this should and probably is now recognised by the business community (Avery *et al.*, 2014). A significant point regarding consumer brand relationships is that the healthiness of such relationships is based upon the commercial marketers' understanding of individuals' lives and their needs: both emotional and practical. Consumers are seen as active meaning-makers in their brand relationships because they have to adapt the brands' meanings to their life-projects which have been created by the commercial marketers (MacInnis *et al.,* 2009).

The research on consumer brands relationships has been developing since 1998 and Fetscherin & Heinrich (2015) argue that consumer brand relationship research now has seven research streams which are different but interconnected. Using a bibliometric citation meta-analysis method, they identify the following streams: '(1) the study of the relationships between various consumer brand relationships constructs such as brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand trust, brand attachment, brand commitment, and brand personality; (2) effects of consumer brand relationships on consumer behaviour and attitude; (3) brand love; (4) brand communities; (5) brand cult and brand relationships and culture; (6) self–brand-connections like self-congruence, self-presentation, and reference group; and finally (7) storytelling and brand relationships' (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015, p.384). Consequently, Fetscherin & Heinrich (2015) opine that scholars from different disciplines collectively contribute to the development of this concept, meaning research on consumer brand relationships is interdisciplinary in its nature.

The research on brand relationship theory is developing further. For example Escalas & Bettman (2015, 2017), Miller *et al.* (2012), McCracken (1989) explore the phenomenon of celebrity endorsement in relation to the brand relationship theory. Escalas & Bettman (2015) opine that:

'appropriate brand meanings from celebrity endorsement are used to construct their [consumers] self-concepts and consumer's self-brand connection is stronger when the consumer is inspired to be like a celebrity and the brand image and image of a celebrity are congruent' (p.47).

Furthermore, Escalas & Bettman (2017) argue that postmodern consumers actively and frequently construct and re-construct their selves and do not seek to have one single stable identity. This idea is related to the notion that individuals use consumption in order to construct their personal identity through the symbolic meanings of brands, where these meanings here are partially gained from a celebrity endorsing the brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2017; Escalas & Bettman, 2015; Miller & Allen, 2012; McCracken, 1989; Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994)

Despite the success of brand relationship theory which explores the importance and purposiveness of brands and brand relationships in consumers' lives, there are some recognised limitations which are revealed by scholars. For example, Bengtsson (2003) critically views the notion of a brand as an active relationship partner in a relationship dyad between a consumer and a brand. Bengtsson (2003, p.154) argues that:

'the personification of brands does not necessarily imply that the brand can become an active partner with the consumer. A brand is an inanimate object and cannot think or feel; thus, it is likely to respond to consumers in a highly-standardized manner.'

Bengtsson (2003) questions the reciprocity of consumer brand relationships and argues that consumers not always accept the idea that they have a relationships with brands mainly because consumers understand the term "relationships" in relation to individuals and not inanimate objects. However, it is important to clarify that Fournier (1998; 2009) emphasises the importance of the roles of brands in consumers' lives which then leads to the metaphorical notion of relationships. Interestingly, based on the limitation of the 'conceptual comparability between brand relationships and interpersonal relationships', Huang & Mitchell (2014, p.38) point out the need to consider para-social relationships and the importance of the role of imagination in the context of the brand relationship. A para-social relationship is an imagined relationship lacking reciprocity (Huang & Mitchell, 2014; Bengtsson, 2003). In the context of the marketing literature, scholars refer to imagination in order to explore how consumers use the information to

understand the reality (Schau, 2000). Huang & Mitchell (2014) make an interesting contribution by arguing that consumer brand relationships and the emotional connection with brands are deeper if they recognise the existence of the relationship with that particular brand. Escalas & Bettman (2017, p.306) further develop the idea of para-social relationships and argue that 'consumers with a high need to belong form a para-social relationship with celebrity endorsers in order to satisfy their need of affiliation, and this makes the consumer feel more connected to the brand'. Clearly, the concept of consumer brand relationships is a very complex phenomenon and one which is developing further and becoming more sophisticated over time.

The following section of the Literature Review explores the concept of identity projects which can be seen as the bridge between CCT and brand relationships theory.

2.8 Identity projects in consumer culture research and brand relationships

The term "identity project" is used and explained by Arnould & Thompson (2005) in their fundamental paper *Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research*. According to the CCT tradition, this term reflects the consumption-orientated nature of self-construction and self-expression meaning that consumption is a source of identity construction and expression (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Shankar & Fitchett (2002, p.512) argue that 'through the consumption of symbolically meaningful categories and brands that enable the individual to construct and create identity' and 'possessions … must ultimately be understood and valued by the extent to which they allow, enable or facilitate a positive sense of being'.

In this research, the categories of: identity project, self-concept, self-identity, identity and self-definition are used interchangeably. The categories of self-concept, self, self-definition, self-worth, self-esteem and self-efficacy are used by Fournier (1998) in the context of brand relationship theory, it should be noted. Fournier (1998) uses the research by Sirgy (1982) and Belk (1988) for the conceptualisation and clarification of these categories. Furthermore, Arnould & Thompson (2005) also use the terms: identity, identity projects and self in a interchangeable manner. This section (2.8) and section 2.9 of the Literature Review provide an overview of the conceptualisations of this thesis and explore fully the categories of self-concept, sense of self and extended self.

The phenomenon of self-identity has been identified by Fournier (1998) as one of the key dimensions of the brand relationship concept. Levy (1959) makes an important contribution to our understanding of consumer behaviour by emphasising the importance of the symbolic meanings of goods for consumers. Furthermore, he argues that, for individuals, it is important to enhance the sense of self, also referred to as "self-concept". Consumers develop their self-concept by using the appropriate symbolic meanings of goods which, as Levy (1959, p.119) terms the process: 'joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself'. The CCT aim, therefore, is to explore and better understand the phenomenon of consumers' ability to 'actively rework symbolic meanings' and further reveal them in their individual and collective identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.871). The authors here add that CCT clearly identifies that these meanings are encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings and material goods.

Having clarified that brands and their symbolic meanings are important for self-identity formation, it is important to provide an overview of self and self-concept categories.
The "self" 'represents the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings that reference himself or herself as an object of thought' (Reed, 2002, p.235). This definition of "self" is frequently adopted by researchers of consumer behaviour, however, there is no one single definition of this phenomenon in the consumer behaviour literature. For instance, White *et al.* (2013) claim that self-concept consists of two subthemes: individual self-concept and social self-concept. Furthermore, the idea of motives of brand avoidance has been developed for each subtheme, where undesired self-image was one of the factors for consumer rejection of a particular brand. Swaminthan *et al.* (2007, p.249) conceptualises self 'as composed of personal identity and a group identity'. Self-concept, therefore, is a very complex phenomenon and has been connected to a variety of different scientific studies: psychoanalytic theory, cognitive theory, behavioural theory and symbolic interactionism, where the latter refers to the idea that self should be seen as a function of interpersonal interactions (Sirgy, 1982). Self-concept is a multidimensional category and might be constructed through the following self-categories: actual self, ideal self and social self (Burns, 1979; Rogers, 1951). Sirgy (1982, p.287) clarifies that "actual self" can be understood through the person's self-perception, "social self" refers to self-presentation to others, and "ideal self" represents 'how a person would like to perceive herself'. Significant to this research is the need to clarify and understand that the human sense of "self" is very frail

and it needs support. This support can be provided by possessions because 'to a large degree, we are what we have and possess' (Tuan 1980, p. 472). Interestingly, this idea was conceived some 100 years earlier by James (1890) who argued that we are the sum of our possessions.

The use of brands for the creation of self-concept is not new in the literature and brands fit perfectly to this process (Escalas & Bettman, 2015, 2017; Escalas, 2004; 2013; Belk, 1988; Solomon, 1983; Sirgy, 1982) because there are many different brands which represent different brand images. Keller (1993) argues that a positive brand image is established through the brand associations which consumers hold in his/her memory and they have to be strong, favourable and unique. Brand association is one of the elements of the self-construction process. In this context, Escalas & Bettman (2003) argue that consumers do incorporate brand association into their self-concept in order to construct their self and to communicate their self-concept to others. Significantly, the process of construction leads to the formation of connections between an individual and a brand. Furthermore, the reference group is considered by Escalas & Bettman (2003) as a source of brand association. The set of brand associations is meaningful for consumers because, through them, individuals achieve their identity goals, furthermore, the brand meaning depends on the whole set of brand associations. Therefore, self-brand connection as a phenomenon is significant for an individual's construction of the self-identity which is consistent and favorable to them (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Significantly, identity goals are based on the self-motivations such as self-enhancement and self-knowledge which are taken by Escalas & Bettman (2003) as central categories in their research. The category of self-enhancement refers to the category of self-esteem and to aspects of social interactions which are interconnected because individuals with high levels of self-esteem tend to create a positive impression of themselves (Baumeister, Tice & Hutton, 1989). The self-knowledge or self-verification aspects refer to the already formed and existing individual's self-concept and self-consistence. The self-verification means that the individual's interpretation of different situations and his/her behaviour have to be consistent with the existing self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The main idea of the research of Escalas & Bettman (2003) is that strong association between reference group and a brand and reference group and consumer's self-concept leads to the development of self-brand connection which consumers use in order to satisfy self-needs such as self-enhancement and self-

verification. In other words, self-needs are the motivation for individuals to create connections with different brands.

Furthermore, the connection between individuals' selves and their brands can be explained through the notion of congruency. Levy (1959) argues that consumers choose the brand with symbolic meaning which are consistent (congruent) with what that consumer thinks/ believes about his/her self. He argues 'modern goods are recognized as essentially psychological things which are symbolic of personal attributes and goals and of social patterns and strivings' (Levy, 1959, p. 119). Self-esteem is one of the needs which consumers tend to satisfy in order to enhance his/her self-concept through the brands' images which are congruent with their selves. Aron *et al.* (1995) argue that self-worth and self-esteem are significant categories of self-concept. The self-esteem category is defined by Sirgy (1982, p.287) as 'tendency to seek experiences that enhance self-concept'. Moreover, this category includes social and interpersonal dimensions such as self-comparison and self-estimation. Rose *et al.* (1998, p.198) argue that 'people have a basic need to evaluate their opinions and abilities and this need can be satisfied by comparing oneself with others.' Stets & Bruke (2014) provide an alternative way of conceptualising self-esteem though the three categories of self-worth, self-efficacy and authenticity. They clarify 'self-worth is the degree to which individuals feel positive about themselves, that is, they feel that they are good and valuable' and that this category links to the individual's desire to 'see themselves favourably' (Stets & Bruke, 2014, p.410). The authors argue that self-efficacy is 'an assessment of what they [people] are capable of doing in situations' and this category is analogous to the term self-competence. Lastly, Stets & Bruke (2014) define authenticity as an individual's motivation to understand him/herself and this category links to the category of self-evaluation.

Research tends to develop and extend the brand relationships theory further by using theories from the different scientific disciplines. Reimann *et al.* (2012) make a significant contribution by using the social-psychological self-expansion theory which is traditionally used by psychologist to study close human relationships. The authors, through this theory, explain the emotional importance of the close consumer brand relationship and motivation to form such relationships. Rapid "self-expansion" is one of the prime reasons why individuals are motivated to form close relationships with other individuals. The overlap between two people is another important motivational aspect

for the formation of the close relationships. Reimann *et al.* (2012) argue that application of these well-developed concepts would improve our overall brand relationship understanding and would help to predict consumer behaviour. The findings of their research reveal that recently formed close brand relationships are more emotional than well-established brand relationships whereas, self-inclusion was stronger with the brands with which consumers had long and sustained relationships. In other words, the more often the individual uses the brand, the stronger the bond between the individual and the brand will be. Significantly, self-inclusion traditionally refers to such categories as resources, perspectives and identity of one individual which, through the close relationship, might be included into the self of the other individual. These categories are studied by consumer culture researchers and directly and indirectly are covered in this Literature Review.

2.9 Possessions, sense of self and brand relationships

Belk (1988), in his research on *Possessions and the Extended Self*, examines the relationship between possessions and sense of self. He argues that it is impossible to understand consumer behaviour without deep understanding of the meanings which consumers attach to their possessions. Furthermore, the author stresses that individuals consider their possessions as a part of their "self" and acknowledges that this idea has existed for many years, as highlighted above.

Belk (1988) focuses on the extended self-phenomenon which is different from the earlier discussed consumer self-concept. He justifies the importance of the role of possessions in the sense of "self" and differentiated "extended self" from the earlier explored consumer self-concept by offering strong evidence. First, he argues that earlier research had seen the extended self through possessions which includes external objects, personal possessions, other people, places, body parts and vital organs. Consequently, the understanding of consumer self-concept has been based on the idea that there is a connection between the consumer perception of the object's characteristics and the consumer's self-perception. However, he argues that it is not necessary for the consumer to make any object, with specific characteristics, to be a part of his/her identity and, at the same time, to have a self-concept in which object characteristics are integrated. An example here (provided by Belk) might be the Statue of Liberty which can be a component of self-identity but the individual self-concept will

not consist of specific characteristics ascribed to this object. The crucial role that possessions play in the consumer's sense of self is stressed by Belk (1988). He stresses that the loss of possessions might influence a consumer's sense of self, more specifically the sense of self could be reduced in some specific cases such as mental state, in hospital, in military training camps and at boarding school. These examples demonstrate how people can lose their sense of self when their personal possessions have been taken away from them. For example, losing the choice of clothing that they wear (being made to wear a uniform), deprived of money or having their name taken away. Additionally, he describes such cases as theft, victims, natural disaster which also contribute to the lessening of self. He stresses that the lessening of self-caused by their loss is heavily influenced by the level of emotional attachment attributed to the lost possession.

Attachment theory is widely used by researchers to investigate and further develop the brand relationship concept. Attachment theory is one of the commonly studied theories in sociology which aims to explore the interpersonal relationship among humans as earlier discussed. Correspondingly, attachment theory has been used by Thomson (2006) and Thomson & Johnson (2006) in order to explain and understand brand relationships. These authors identify that the relationships which people have with their brands could be explained through the individual interpersonal styles of attachments. Also, some authors demonstrate the relation between attachment styles and the brand choices and brand personality. More specifically, consumers with different levels of avoidance and anxiety will prefer sincerer or exciting brands (Swaminathan *et al.,* 2008).

An interesting example has been put forward by Niederland & Sholevar (1981). They state that some young American males personalise (customise) their cars and for them, having a personalised car is an important part of their extended self. Consequently, if any damage happened to the object of possession (the car), the owner's reaction would be very similar to the reaction they would have if their own body had been damaged or injured. Individuals, therefore, use possessions to satisfy psychological needs by expressing and creating/ re-enforcing self-identity. Possessions are also used by individuals to serve social purposes by providing connections to family, the community and/ or other social groups such as brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Escalas & Bettman (2003), Fournier (1998) and Fournier *et al.* (2012) all stress that brands play an identical role in the creation/ re-enforcement of self.

Traditionally, the central idea of materialist possessions refers to the point that self can be transformed through the 'symbolic connection between possessions and one's personal history' and possessions 'provide concrete links between self, the material world and the cultural context of consumption' (Bardhi *et al.*, 2012, p.510-511). Self-presentation is another significant component of identity which has been identified by Goffman (1959). He argues that self-presentation is the deliberate and tangible part of identity. Earlier, Goffman (1959) argues that self-presentation is a continuous process of social performance. Self-image is another category which has to be covered in the context of self-concept and materialist possessions. It is developed through the socialisation process and through interaction with others. The expression of self-image can be accomplished through the use of products in different social situations (Sirgy, 1982).

Dixson & Duck (1993) argue that people may develop relationships as a way of understanding symbols and developing a meaningful existence. To explore the importance of the brand relationship for consumers and how they relate to the brands, Fournier (1998) focuses on the meanings which are provided to consumers by these relationships. One of the strongest and most significant points formulated by Fournier (1998) is based on the notion that the development of an individual's personality largely depends on relationships in which he/she is involved. Importantly, different scientists have actively investigated the significance of brand relationships for consumers. For instance, Escalas & Bettman (2005) argue that the relationships that consumers have with brands are a shadow of their own identity and an expression of their behaviour. Relationships, therefore, are playing significant roles in the individual's life as they fulfil personal needs for the identity expression, bonding and affection (Miell, 1996). An important value of relationships is derived from social and functional benefits which can be delivered to the individuals. The functional benefit relates to the idea that through the interaction, individuals will be able to fulfil their self-identity goals. The interaction with other people might be useful, for example, the learning process might be more efficient if it would appear in-group situations. The idea of fulfilling the self-identity goal is moving the functional aspects of the relationships' benefits forward to

the social benefits. The social benefits relate to life themes and again, to the self-identity goals (Fournier *et al.*, 2012).

As discussed earlier, the symbolic meanings are integrated into the product which the consumer wants to obtain in order to create an image of his/herself. In the current environment, people are creating multiple identities as there is a wide choice of objects which have symbolic meanings. These meanings are shared by the consumers through the socialisation processes and, at the same time, these processes are helping them to create their own interpretation of themselves and express each of their multiple identities (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Moreover, some authors have stressed that self-identity is rooted in the socialisation processes, therefore, there is always tension between meanings which have been created by the consumers for themselves, and meanings which are being demonstrated in the society. The collective imagination and interpretation of symbolic meanings might be differentially accepted by different people because one product might have a variety of meanings to them. Markus & Nurius (1986, p. 954), claim:

> 'an individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet a pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular socio-cultural and historical context and from the models, images, symbols provided by the media and the individual's immediate social experience'.

In post-modern times, therefore, "self" is actively constructed and created through the consumption process. It has been argued that 'brands can be used by the consumer as resources for the symbolic construction of the self' (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998, p.139). Consumers, therefore, can use the symbolic value of brands in different ways. These include: to create membership of different social groups; to emphasise belonging to particular social groups; and to differentiate his/herself (Patterson & O' Malley, 2006).

Interestingly, the importance of consumer's storytelling is also investigated by scholars as a significant element for the consumer's engagement with consumption objects. Woodside & Megehee (2010, p.425) opine that 'consumers achieve deeper understanding of themselves via the stories they tell to themselves and others in comparison to not retelling their experiences.' On the subject, Escalas (2004, p.168)

argues that creation of stories is important for consumers because it helps them to 'understand the world around them, what goes on in their own lives, and who they are as individuals and members of society.' Furthermore, she clarifies, the process of storytelling contributes to the formation of self-brand connection and meanings of brands are often formed through this process. Fetscherin & Heinrich (2015) argue that companies use storytelling techniques in order to communicate to consumers, build relationships with them and consumers are willing to purchase legends, emotions and myths. Moreover Woodside *et al.* (2008, p. 97) argue that 'people relate to each other in terms of stories and products and brands often play both central and peripheral roles in their stories'.

It is clearly acknowledged that interpersonal relationship theories are widely used by scholars in order to develop and explore the consumer brand relationship concept. However, Huang & Mitchell (2014) point out that there are some theoretical limitations of such an approach to study brand relationships. They bring to attention that not all brands are personified, citing examples of relatively mundane every-day products (for example laundry products). Another limitation refers to the metaphorical analogy of relationships with brands and interpersonal relationships. More specifically, this relates to the consumers' capability to use the interpersonal metaphoric categories to describe their feelings towards brands (Huang & Mitchell, 2014). However, Fournier (2009) concludes the topic by opining that it is not necessary for individuals to consciously realise the existence of the relationship with the brand as long as it acts as a relationship partner in similar ways to interpersonal relationships.

To conclude, Part 1 of the Literature Review has explored the nature of CCT and brand relationship theory. The connection of these two concepts is illustrated through such research categories as identity projects; the active role of consumers and the brand concept which have been discussed above. Brand relationship theory is central to this research and, consequently, the principles provided by Fournier (2009), which are clarified in section 2.7, are key in this research. The following section is dedicated to reviewing the literature on children and their position in social science research which is needed in order to clarify their position in this research project. Moreover, Part 2 reviews the existing research on children as consumers, their brands and it identifies the gap in the existing literature.

Part 2 Children as consumers

This part of the Literature Review begins with the clarification of how children are viewed by scholars and society. Section 2.10 of this part of the Literature Review ends with the clarification that this research is driven by the principles of New Sociology which positions children as active individuals. This is followed by identification of the research gap which is supported/ connected to Part 1 above. The current study aims to position children within CCT through the exploration of children's brand relationships and this is supported by the existing research on children as consumers and their brands/brand relationships which is presented in this part.

Before presenting the children's position in social science research, definitions of a child are considered. Answering such questions as "what is a child?"; "what is childhood?" and what is a "child as consumer?" is not an easy task. Davin (1999, p.15) acknowledges one of the reasons for this challenge. She states:

> 'the problem with childhood as an analytical term is that it is too familiar. We have all been children; we all know children; some of us have had children, brought them up or taught them. We all 'know' what we mean by child and childhood'.

Furthermore, the cultural, economic and historical contexts influence the way a child is defined, therefore there 'is no absolute definition', opines Davin (1999, p.15). There are challenges if one attempts to provide a definition from the legal perspective, for example. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' and this is the definition of a child which used in this research. However, it is noted that the latter part of this definition opens opportunities for providing a different interpretation of the term "a child" because "age of majority" is different in different countries (for example, 18 in England and Wales and 16 in Scotland). Also, Sharma (2018) provides an interesting acknowledgment that the convention does not reflect the life of the un-born children. Therefore, it is impossible to provide one single, unified definition of a child.

This research, it should be noted, is driven by the principles of New Sociology which recognises children as active agents, participants of the social world and meaning

makers. This type of sociology moves away from the generic and universal way of viewing a child. Furthermore, childhood in this research is a construction: social and historical (Gabriel, 2017; Leonard, 2015; James & Prout, 2015, 1997; James & James, 2008, 2012; Uprichard, 2008; Corasoro, 2005). For this research, Cook's (2009) article provides a strong foundation which clarifies the position and understanding of a child and a child as consumer/an active consumer. His article provides a historical overview of the different views on "the child" and "child as consumer" and explains the epistemological changes in the way children and childhood have been viewed over time. This research adopts Cook's (2009, p.272) interpretation of the child and that is as 'active, knowing and non-derivative social actors' who 'create their own worlds and childhood'.

Section 5.5 begins with an exploration of the perspectives on childhood which are adopted in this research. Having provided the adopted definition of a child and provided discussion the childhood phenomenon, the following section reviews the literature pertaining to how scholarship has positioned children and children as consumers in social science research.

2.10 Children's position in social science research

In the scientific field of marketing, child consumption is mostly studied by application of the production of consumption approach using the Piagetian developmental paradigm and, consequently, it refers to the socialisation process (Martens *et al.,* 2004). Child consumer socialisation is defined by Ward (1974, p.2) as the 'processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace.' This definition is reflected in the review of consumer socialisation research produced by John (1999): *Consumer Socialization of Children: A Retrospective Look at Twenty-Five Years of Research*. Here, she claims that socialisation can be seen as 'a developmental process that proceeds through a series of stages as children mature into adult consumers' (John, 1999, p.186).

Significantly, John (1999) integrates the stages of cognitive and social development, earlier developed by Piaget, into her child consumer socialisation process study. The phenomenon of children's development as consumers has been assessed by John (1999) through the following categories: development of consumer knowledge, skills, and

values which are developed through the different age periods. Additionally, the author here draws attention to the relation between 'age-related improvements in cognitive abilities' and 'consumer knowledge' (John, 1999, p.184). The important point emerging from this study is that the ability of the child to think more abstractly within the symbolic thoughts and refers to Piaget's "analytical stage" (ages 7-11). The next stage is called the "reflective stage" (11-16) where the child starts to recognise social meanings and begins to form his/her own identity. Also, at the 11 – 16 age group, the child pays more attention 'to the social aspects of being a consumer, making choices, and consuming brands' (John, 1999, p.184). Therefore, according to John (1999), consumer socialisation is an important process which children pass through in order to become adult consumers and, more significantly here, the development of the consumer knowledge depends on the child's 'age-related improvements in cognitive abilities' (John, 1999, p.184).

However, Hardman (1973, p.502) suggests that children have to be studied in their own rights and not as muted groups as they are studied by child sociologists. Cody (2012) deeply considers the limitations of the "production of consumption" approach to study child consumption. Interestingly, she also considers the concepts of commercial enculturation which is developed by Cook (2010) and is discussed in section 2.11 below. Cody (2012) argues that, even though the developmentalist paradigm is widely used by marketers to study children as consumers, it is 'revealing little of the ways in which children use consumer culture to mediate the intricacies of their lived experiences' (Cody, 2012, p.43).

In response to this, Cody (2012) uses the theory of liminal consumption within the existing arguments to address the child's absence in social studies. In order to better understand the child's position in sociology, and consequently consumer culture, it is important to observe the position of the child in scientific research and how it has been changing over time.

The development of philosophical, sociological and psychological thought about individualism and society has expanded our understanding and furthered our knowledge of the role and position of the child in society and his/her socialisation process and development. Corsaro (2005) makes a significant clarification regarding new ways of child conceptualisation in sociology by relating it to the new theoretical angles which

are raised in this area and termed "constructivist" and "interpretive". Furthermore, he proposes two models of the socialisation process: the deterministic and constructive models. It is significant that the differences between these two models are based on such logical aspects as period of time, theoretical views on the child from the different scientific perspectives and consequently, the child's position in the society, the role of society and the role of the child in the society. These have all been represented in these models which are discussed below.

2.10.1 The deterministic models

The deterministic models describe the socialisation process of child development which is similar to the learning process which 'goes on throughout life' (Parsons, 1991 p.208). Significantly, here the child is "taken over" by society and, at the same time, society is a strong 'determinant of individual behaviour', therefore, the role of the child is recognised as passive (Corsaro, 2005 p.7). Additionally, Corsaro recognises two groups of subsidiary models: the functionalist models and the reproductive models of the socialisation process and these will be discussed below.

Talcott Parsons was one of the most influential sociologists of his time and he represents the functionalist models of socialisation process which were popular in the 1950s and 1960s (Corsaro, 2005). Parsons, (1991) viewed the social system as a system of action:

> 'in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the 'optimization of gratification' and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of structured and shared symbols and conditions' (p.3).

Therefore, this model identifies such important characteristics in society as "order" and "balance". Parsons (1991, p.208) also argues that 'the major value-orientation patterns' which are acquired during childhood are the most stable and permanent throughout adult life. The functionalist model can be conceptualised as a descriptive model of socialisation which saw the child not as a fully integrated member of society, but also as one who needs to learn the patterns of behaviour before being integrated. Therefore, the focus of this model was orientated on the explanation of the process of socialisation

carried out through appropriate training, or parental childrearing in order to fit into society and make a contribution to it. In addition, the socialisation process has been viewed as a mechanism for conveying the norms and values which have been accepted by society.

Developing this further, the scientific understanding of the socialisation process continues to be developed and the following models of socialisation are identified by Corsaro (2005). These include the reproductive models. These focus on such important categories as inequality and conflicts in society. Significantly, the models emphasise such aspects of society as accessibility of cultural resources, the role of social-classes and importance of the social institutions.

Significantly, the deterministic models were missing very important aspects of the child socialisation process such as abilities of children to be active and innovative in society. These models have been mostly focused on the outcomes of the socialisation process and provided a more passive role for the child.

2.10.2 The constructivist model

Developmental psychology was one of the areas which strongly influenced sociological studies over a period between the 1960s and the 1980s. Corsaro (2005) developed the Constructivist Model having identified the contribution of Jean Piaget. Piaget's contribution, according to Cosaro, (2005, p.10) was crucial as he believes that the children: 'perceived and organised their world in ways that were qualitatively different from adults', thus the child began to be seen as an active participant of the society who can have his/her own interpretation and constructive understanding of the world.

Significantly, Piaget focuses on the "child-development" rather than the "child learning process". The most important and influential theory here is Piaget's "theory of cognitive development" where he identifies four main stages of a child's cognitive development: 1) sensorimotor stage (birth to 2 years); 2) preoperational (2 - 7 years); 3) concrete operational (7 - 11 years) and 4) formal operational (11 years through to adulthood).

These four stages seek to demonstrate how the child adapts during different age periods to the environment through the discovering, understanding and developing different

capacities such as language and different thoughts such as symbolism (Durkin, 1995; John, 1999). Consequently, these stages seek to show how the child's view of self, the world around him/her and his/her position in this world is changing over time. In addition, another important constructivist theorist, Lev Vygotsy, focuses on internalisation of culture, where language is important for culture reproduction which 'contains the knowledge of generation' (Corsaro, 2005, p.13). It is also important to recognise the highly significant contribution made by Jean Piaget who 'transformed the field of developmental psychology' and, it is accepted that 'once psychologists looked at development through Piaget's eyes, they never saw children in quite the same way again' (Miller, 1993, p.81).

Although widely used, the Piaget theory has been criticised as "constructivism" which provides a lonely and isolated view of children and suggests that the role of social factors is missing, and the aspects of the cultural systems which can be influenced by interpersonal relations are not considered at all. Nevertheless, the constructive model can be summarised in terms of viewing the child as an "active agent", a "knowledge seeker" and a "constructer of his/ her own social world".

2.10.2a Fundamental contributions to the theory of child development

This section of the Literature Review is dedicated to the fundamental ideas which are developed by the main contributors to the field of developmental psychology. Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Lev Vygotsky are the classic authors whose ideas are still relevant and used in order to better understand the age-related developments of children.

Whereas Piaget's main focus is on child cognitive development, Sigmund Freud is noteworthy for his fundamental research and contribution to the field of psychoanalysis and children's psychosexual development. Freud's research and ideas, especially in the development of psychoanalysis, are still widely discussed in social science, medical studies, marketing (especially in the field of consumer behaviour) and other different research disciplines. Interestingly, Kassarjian (1971, p.410) argues: 'Freud and his critics have contributed much to advances in marketing theory'. In his work he aimed to explain the process of children's development/gender development. Freud and his colleagues attempted to answer the following questions: 'how do children know whom

they should imitate in the first place? and what motivates them to adopt certain people as role models?' (Beal, 1994, p.59).

Freud believes that children pass through five stages in their psychosexual development which are age- and biological-function related. The fact that children develop through the age-related stages is one of the main contributions of Freud to the field of developmental psychology. His ideas provide support to those of the Piaget (discussed in section 2.10.2 above). These stages are: oral (birth -1 year); anal (1-3 years); phallic (3-6 years); latency (6-11 years) and genital (age 12 onwards). He believes that these stages contribute to the development of personality. The experience and the degree of stress which a child obtains at each stage of development contributes to the formation of the personality and personality characteristics. Interestingly, Freud was one of the first scholars who recognised the importance of children's early age experiences which affect future personality development. Freud emphasises that children's gender development occurs through the learning process. Beal (1994, p.59) argues:

> 'Freud proposed that children learn to become male or female by identifying with parent of the same sex, meaning that the child adopts the mother or father as a role model, imitates the parent, internalizes his or her values, and tries to be like him or her always. As a result of this identification, children acquire a superego to help guide their behaviour as well as a masculine or feminine identity.'

Freud clarifies the importance of unconsciousness and consciousness for individuals' mental life and these categories are fundamental for psychoanalysis. There are three well-known components/forces of personality which are identified by Freud (Table 2.3 below):

Table 2.3. Freudian components/forces of personality

Id	'The source of all driving psychic energy', this is an in-born, unconscious component of the personality which includes primitivistic and instinctive forms of behaviour;
Ego	this is a partly unconscious and a rational component of personality which is responsible for communication with outside world. This component 'reflects the child's emerging abilities to perceive, learn, remember and reason'. Furthermore, this component reduces tension between "id" and "superego" as Freud believes that these components are in constant conflict;
Superego	Is the 'the moral arm of personality' and 'it develops between the ages of 3 and 6.' This component includes all the knowledge, values and moral norms which children have learned. The superego controls and systemises the child's behaviour.

Source: Kassarjian (1971, p.409); Shaffer (2008, p.39); Freud (1995); Baker,(2001, p.107)

These categories are effectively used in the consumer behaviour discipline. Interestingly, they are gradually integrated into the stages of psychosexual development (Shaffer, 2008). For instance, Beal (1994) refers to Freud's ideas and argues that development of the ego occurs at the anal (1-3 years) stage and at this stage the formation of problem-solving skills of a personality occurs. Prior to the development of this, the child's behaviour is driven mainly by id (or libido) and during this period, children become more independent and realise that not all their desires are instantly satisfied. Consequently, Beal (1994, p.54) argues that 'we often see 2 year olds having tantrums at the supermarket'. The development of superego begins at the phallic stage (3-6 years) and this stage can be linked to the process of learning the gender roles. At this stage children recognise gender differences and begin to 'identify with the same-sex parent, meaning that the child looks to the parent as a role model, imitates him or her, and internalizes the parent's values, behaviour and ideals as his/her own' (Beal, 1994, p.55). Additionally, Freud introduces the term of "oedipal/electra crisis/conflict" (3-5 years) which explains the period when children start noticing biological differences between the two genders. This crisis is a motivation for the development of the super-ego, he argues. The resolution of this crisis leads to gender role learning through the identification with the same-sex parent. It is important to recognise that 'each stage continues alongside the current dominant stage' (Goldman & Goldman, 1982, p.15). Furthermore, during the latency (6-11 years) stage, the appropriate gender roles are adopted and the child begins to learn about society and the world around them. The superego is actively developing and children are interested in social relationships. Interestingly, at this stage 'children who had cross-sex friendships often relinquish them' (Levine & Munsch, 2010 p.34). During the final stage, the genital stage (age 12 onwards), the child's ego and superego are largely developed and, from the age of 12 onwards, the child is capable of developing interpersonal relationships and 'true sexual interest occurs between peers' (Levine & Munsch, 2010, p.34).

Jung (1954) stresses that he acknowledges the value of Freudian psychoanalysis and his contribution to the field of psychology generally. However, he introduces the concept of analytical psychology which:

> 'lays stress on the fact that psychological investigation along psychoanalytic lines has left the narrow confines of a medical technique, with its restriction to certain theoretical assumptions, and had passed over into the general field of normal psychology. Therefore, when I speak of the connection between

analytical psychology and education, I am leaving Freudian analysis out of account' (Jung, 1954, p.50).

Analytical psychology is useful for the understanding of the child's mind. In his later thoughts and ideas, Jung (1954) strongly criticises Freudian ideas and argues that he does not believe that child-parents/relatives/siblings relationships can be explained through the development of the initial stage of sexual function. Jung (1954, p.50.) suggests an interesting point that 'when pathological explanations are present to a degree which would justify a psychological explanation along sexual lines, it is not the child's own psychology that is fundamentally responsible, but the sexually distributed psychology of the parents.'

Jung (1954, p.50) believes that 'the mind of the child is extremely susceptible and dependent, and is steeped for a long time in the atmosphere of his parental psychology, only freeing itself from this influence relatively late, if at all'. Psychology recognises that an individual's mind has conscious and unconscious components where the latter contributes to the formation of consciousness which begins at early childhood. Jung (1954, p.52) suggests 'during the first years of life there is hardly any consciousness, though the existence of psychic processes manifests itself at a very early stage … Only, when the child begins to say "I" is there any perceptible continuity. But in between there are frequent periods of unconsciousness '. Jung (1954) clarifies that the development of consciousness (of ego) begins at ages between 3 and 5 but could occur earlier. Furthermore, at the age of 6 the child's psychological development still heavily reflects the psychology of his/her parents, therefore the child's personality development is dependent on its parents.

Freud and Jung have different views on children and their cognitive development processes regardless of the fact that neither of them were specifically interested in childhood psychology. Having clarified this, childhood and the concept of a child are the basis for their psychological theories. Mercer (2003, p.124) refers to both of these scholars and argues that 'Instead of seeing the child as an immature, yet unformed person [Frued's view], Jung held that children possess a unique relationship to the collective unconscious.'

Having acknowledged the important contributions of Freud and Jung, this Literature Review now moves to the contributions of Lev Vygotsky, a highly influential psychologist with a particular interest in developmental psychology. Vygotsky proposes a theoretical construct/approach which he calls the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in order to explain the process of children's cognitive development and learning processes from the sociocultural perspective. Vygotsky believes that a significant proportion of a child's everyday activities takes place in the ZPD.

This approach is different from the Piagetian stage-orientated approach in that it acknowledges the importance of collective actions and interactions which takes place in the social context. Vygotsky (1978, p.86) defines ZPD as:

> ' the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers'.

It is clear that Vygotsky emphasises the importance of the interaction with adults/caregivers and peers for children's learning and consequent development. Therefore, the ZPD represents children's functions which are not yet fully developed but they have a potential to be developed further with help from others. This approach is still successfully used in schools where children are provided with support and guidance which allows them to obtain new skills and knowledge. Vygotsky argues that education has to be positioned within this zone in order to guarantee children's further development.

Interestingly, Davydov (1926, p.xxix) recommends understanding this concept in terms of 'everything which the child may initially do together with its peers or with grown-ups, and then all on its own, also lies fully within the zone of its proximal mental development'. Vygotsky (1962), in his book "Thought and Language", emphasises the role of language (and other signs and symbols) as a cultural tool for children's learning and reproduction of culture. Furthermore, he underlines the role of language in the process of internalisation which he defines as 'internal reconstruction of an external operation' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.56). He explains 'every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level; first between people (interpshychological) and then inside the child

(intraphsychological)' (Vygotsky 1978, p.57). Therefore, Vygotsky (1926) proposes the social nature of the individual self-development and argues that the development of a child as an autonomic individual occurs through the interaction and engagement with other people, in other words, it is always a collective act. Significantly, Vygotsky (1978) recognises that different cultures with their specific settings affect the way children develop and different cultures might have different support systems for children. Interestingly, Corsaro (2015, p.14) clarifies that Vygotsky recognises that 'all our psychological and social skills (cognitive, communicative, and emotional) are always acquired from our interactions with others '.

The ZPD is used by Sethna *et al*. (2018) who argue that it can be used in order to understand how the child's consumer knowledge and behaviour are developing. The following figure (figure 2.2) is developed by these authors in order to explain ZPD in the context of children as consumers:
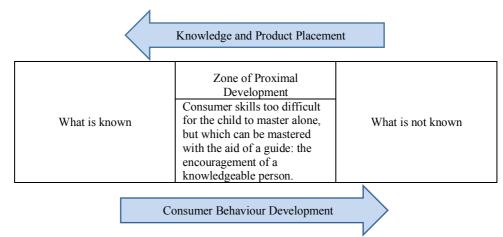
Figure 2.2 Bamber's model of placement and consumer behaviour development

Source: Sethna *et al*. (2018, p. 161)

According to Vygotsky (1978) the cognitive development of the child occurs through an internalisation of language and social interactions which take place in a guided learning setting. He further clarifies that social and cultural factors affect the cognitive development of the child. Interestingly, Sethna *et al*. (2018, p. 160 citing Vygotsky, 1926) applied the ZPD model to the "children as consumer phenomenon" and argue that:

> 'children and their playmates co-construct knowledge in their own environment, which in turn influences how they think and what they think about marketing channels and adults, who are within the child' ZPD, transmit their own culture's

tolls of intellectual adaptation, which children then internalize (Vygotsky, 1926)'.

2.10.3 Interpretative reproductionism

Corsaro's (2005) framework of interpretative reproductionism is valuable in order to gain an understanding of the child's role and position within consumer culture. This framework, it is noted, is based on the previous sociological theories which focus on child socialisation theories and have been discussed above. Corsaro (2005, p.18-19) explains in detail the term interpretive and the term reproductive:

> 'The term 'interpretive' captures innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society. Children produce and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term 'reproductive' captures the idea that children do not simply internalize society and culture, but also actively contribute to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, constrained by the existing social structures and by social reproduction.'

Therefore, the earliest theories viewed child-development in a linear way, where the child has to pass through the set of developmental stages in order to become a competent adult. The interpretative reproduction perspective, on the other hand, sees child-development as a reproductive process where the child attempts to make sense of his/her culture and participate in it, as well as interpret the adult world. Consequently, 'children come to collectively produce their own peer world and culture', according to Corsaro (2005, p.24). Cook (2004), considering the child from a consumer culture perspective, appears to agree with Corsaro (2005) and also claims that the child is an active participant of the social world and, as such, is an important part of our scientific understanding of consumption and consumer culture and, therefore, their "presence" and "practices" must be recognised, considered and investigated.

Despite the fact that the developmental approach to study children as consumers is successfully used by scholars in relation to children and their brands (reviewed in Section 2.13), this research adopts the principles of New Sociology in order to position the child. The New Sociology principles correlate with the ideas of Corsaro (2005) in

relation to the children's active role in social life. James & James (2012) argue that the idea of children as active social actors occurred amongst social scientist in the 1970s, when Hardman (1973, p.85) opines that 'children should be seen as people to be studied in their own right and not just as receptacles of adult teaching'. Therefore, the New Sociology of childhood 'allows children a more direct voice in the production of sociological data' (James & Prout, 2015, p.4).

2.10.3a - New Sociology – The position of the child in this research

This research adopts the New Sociology approach together with the CCT approach to investigate the child brand relationships because both of these theoretical underpinnings are driven by the active role of consumers (children in this research).

James & Prout (1997, p. 7-8) provide features of the New Sociology of Childhood, some of them are adopted in this research and fit well with the principles of CCT, these are:

- 'Childhood is understood as a social construction' and childhood is 'neither natural nor universal.'
- 'Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity.'
- 'Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.'
- 'Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the society in which they live.'

Significantly, the way children were positioned in the society and in the scientific world was changing over the time: from the dominating developmental psychology approach to the principles of socialisation and then to the concept of New Sociology (Leonard, 2015). The existing discussion in the literature of the construction of children/childhood leads to the notions of being and becoming. Uprichard (2008) clarifies:

'*being* a child is seen as a social actor actively constructing 'childhood', the 'becoming' child is seen as an 'adult in the making', lacking competencies of the 'adult' that he or she will *become*' (p.303).

Uprichard (2008) proposes an interesting idea that children should be viewed and studied as "being and becoming", meaning these two discourses should be applied together. This approach 'extends the notion of agency offered by the 'being' discourse to consider the child as a social actor constructing his or her everyday life and the world around them, both in the present and the future' (Uprichard, 2008, p.311).

As explained above, the position of children in this research is based on the outcomes of New Sociology studies according to which children are active agents, participants of the social world and meaning makers (Gabriel, 2017; Leonard, 2015; James & Prout, 2015, 1997; James & James, 2008, 2012; Uprichard, 2008; Corsaro, 2005). This position correlates with the notion of active consumers in CCT and brand relationship theory and therefore, allows the positioning of children within these two research streams. However, Langer (2005) argues that the debate around the child's active or passive position in consumer research is distractive and it is more important to pay attention to the social and cultural structure of the environment in which children are making their active consumer decisions.

Thus far, Part 2 of this Literature Review has explored children's position in the social science research and has explored the ideas provided by the New Sociology of Childhood in which children are seen as active individuals. The following part of the Literature Review begins with the gap identification of this research and acknowledges that children as consumers are missing in consumer culture research, mainly because their autonomic position has not been fully acknowledged by scholars in marketing.

2.11 The child's position in consumer culture research – identification of the gap in existing research

There currently exists a large segment of consumers which has not been widely studied by marketers through the lens of CCT. Interestingly, children as consumers have been recognised by business practitioners before scholars. Cook (2000, p.488) clarifies that in the 1930s 'merchants, manufacturers, and advertisers began to target children directly as individual consumers'.

Daniel Cook is one of the foremost researchers who stresses the neglected position of children's consumer culture in social research and thinking. Cook (2008; 2010) argues

that children have, to date, largely been "invisible" in such research as the social, historical, cultural aspects of consumerism. Moreover, he stresses that children should be included in the consumer culture research area to further our overall understanding as they are consumers and members of society who are active, valuable and who tend to develop their own identity. Martens *et al.* (2004) argue that the studies of the types of children's goods, toy culture and other marketing media and cultural studies have mainly been focused upon the nature of markets for children's goods, as opposed to the children themselves. Significantly, they contend that researchers' interests in the symbolic meanings which children create around goods is neglected. Moreover, the importance of studying children themselves, rather than considering them as a homogeneous social group, and the lack of the empirical research, is stressed by Martens *et al.* (2004) and Cody (2012). Martens *et al.* (2004, p.161) stress that 'relatively little is known about how children engage in practices of consumption, or what the significance of this is to their everyday lives and broader issues of social organisation'. It is important to illuminate that research on children as consumers began to be recognised as a clear body of research in the mid-1970s and then scholars were mainly interested in children's understanding of advertising (John, 1999). Since 1970 and more recently, scholars base their research on the principles of cognitive development and consumer socialisation developed by John (1999), Piaget (1973) and Ward (1974). For example, by Ji (2002), Achenreiner & John (2003), Ross & Harradine (2004), McAlister & Cornwell (2010) and others. Piaget's (1953) model identifies four different stages of age and level of cognitive development associated with each of them.

These stages seek to demonstrate how the child adapts to the environment during different age periods through the discovering, understanding and developing of different capacities such as language, and develop different thoughts such as symbolism (Durkin, 1995). John (1999) has used the Piaget model in order to explain the consumer socialisation of children and explains how the child develops as a consumer as his/her knowledge, skills and values develop over the different age ranges (this is explained in section 2.10). Significantly, despite much successful research using the Piaget model in the marketing field (details below in section 2.13 and 2.14) it still faces criticism from researchers who recognise the importance of the CCT as an approach to improve our understanding of how the child relates to brands, which is a central tenet of this research. For example, Nairn *et al.* (2008) explain three reasons why the current approach (the developmental approach) of studying the child's relationships with brands

needs to be expanded through the application of CCT. The first reason is that CCT would enable, not only age factors, but also such factors as gender, ethnicity and social classes to be considered. The second reason relates to the emotional aspects of consumption, peer group influence and the changes in social interpretations of symbols. The final reason is that it would enable researchers to consider the social and cultural influences on the process of interaction between the child and symbolic brands. Nairn *et al*. (2008, p.637) make an important contribution as they identify that 'brand symbolism is deeply gendered, operating as a key domain through which girls and boys negotiate gendered identities'.

Interestingly, seven years after the Nairn *et al*. (2008) research, Nairn & Spotswood (2015) still support this point and argue that there is a need for further and better understanding of how children engage with the commercial world and highlight the importance of this engagement for their daily lives. Nairn & Spotswood (2015) use the Social Practice Theory (STP) in order to close the existing gap in the literature. In their research, they demonstrate:

> 'how branded clothes and technology products offered by the marketplace combine – in regular, repeated and predictable ways – with both the socially sanctioned objective of achieving and maintaining a place in the peer hierarchy and the three skills we have labelled social consumption recognition, social consumption performance and social consumption communication' (Nairn & Spotswood, 2015, p.1474).

The identified existing gaps in the literature can be addressed from different perspectives and angles. For example, Willet (2015) attempts to close this gap by focusing on children's social relationships in connection with their consumer activities and popular media. Willet (2015, p.1), argues that her research:

> 'addresses a gap in the literature in the fields of sociology and anthropology of consumer culture which largely construct children's consumer culture as exceptional to, or derived from, adult consumer culture'.

Consequently, the author positions consumer culture from both symbolic and constitutive perspectives and proposes that group affiliation occurs through the media references and play-activities. Moreover, children's life stories are supported by the

consumer culture resources and the formation of the products' meanings is constituted by children in playground situations. Consequently, Willet (2015, p.419) argues that 'children's consumer culture must be seen as a lived culture.'

This thesis will further help to close that existing gap in the literature by studying the child as an active consumer through the lens of CCT along with a focus on the brand relationship theory. The children's brand relationship concept has been addressed by few scholars but include Lopez & Rodrriguez (2018), Rodhain & Aurier (2016), Ji (2002; 2008) and Chaplin & John (2005). However, the existing research is driven mainly by the developmental approach and does not comprehensively apply the developed principles of consumer's brand relationships. However, the aforementioned research is reviewed in this Literature Review in sections 2.13 and 2.14.

Ji's (2002; 2008) contribution is central for this research because it makes an early attempt to develop the concept of children's brand relationships. Ji (2002) uses the principles of interpersonal relationship theories to explain the phenomenon and position the child as a developing consumer. Also, she takes into consideration the social environment of children's brand relationships and the following socialisation agents are considered: family; peers; and mass media. Consequently, her analysis identifies 10 types of children's brand relationships which are explained through the interpersonal relationships metaphors and she establishes that 'the bond between the child and a brand is based on a unique history of interactions and intended to serve developmental and social-emotional goals' (Ji 2008, p.605).

Significantly, Ji (2002) uses a sample of just three children from the same family whose ages are 7, 9 and 13. Her participant's age justification is only based on the idea that 'brand preference is originally expressed during the ages 7-18' which was earlier developed by Guest in 1964. Therefore, the sample in her research is viewed critically in terms of (i) its limited age range and (ii) its limited sociocultural context. The research proposed here will address these limitations and use a CCT approach to study the phenomenon in order to further develop the understanding of relationships children have with their brands.

Significantly, Cook's (2010) concept of "commercial enculturation", is central to this research and forms the research view of children as consumers. This theoretical perspective moves the focus to:

'how consumption and meaning, and thus culture, cannot be separated from each other but arise together through social contexts and processes of parenting and socializing with others' (Cook, 2010, p. 66).

Consequently, commercial enculturation orientates to the 'variety of ways children come to know and participate in commercial life' (Cook, 2010, p. 66). In order to provide focus, the brand relationship concept, as a part of CCT, is equally central here because the concept of child-brand relationships is not yet fully developed. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore children's relationships with brands, where children are viewed as active consumers.

The beginning of the Literature Review clarifies that the brand relationship theory belongs to CCT. Primarily, but not solely, this is because the aspects of consumers' identity projects, the active role of consumers and the brand phenomenon are concepts which are shared by these two research streams. Having identified the gap in the literature, the following section explores the existing research on children's identity projects in the context of CCT.

2.12 Children's identity projects in context of CCT

Dittmar (2007, p.23) argues that 'favourite material possessions can help individuals to sustain a sense of who they are, particularly during periods of change or crisis'. Despite the fact that Dittmar (2007) stresses the detrimental influence of consumer culture on the children's identities, she makes a strong point that consumer culture not only forces people to buy more products, but also encourages consumers to seek their identities and fulfil them through the particular products which they choose. Hill (2011), in her studies of "Endangered Childhood", argues that children are exposed to many forms of marketing media depriving them of what she refers to as a "normal" childhood and opines that this could impact negatively on their identity formation. This is especially true in western nations but it is spreading rapidly globally, she argues. However, Hill (2011, p.348) also argues that 'in contemporary marketing, the desire to consume has been transformed into a set of timeless emotional needs all children are believed to possess'.

Dittmar (2007) argues that since social and personal identity are symbolised and communicated through goods, social identity and material goods are linked through the psychological associations. Related to this, Hill (2011, p.354) claims 'in fact, coveted material possessions often play a positive role for identity maintenance and continuity.' She, further, argues that branded images are playing an important role in identity formation, especially during childhood. Furthermore, brands perform two important functions for consumers' identity: the emotional and a social. The emotional role refers to the process of self-identifications, whilst the social role portrays self to society through the communication (Hill, 2011).

Ji (2008) refers to the interpersonal relationship literature and argues that individuals, including children, are motivated to form a relationship with a brand through categories of intimacy and the self-development concept. The self-development concept in her research is based on the contribution of Damon & Hart (1988). They argue that there are three levels of the child self-concept development. Level one (early childhood) can be explained through the possession category, where brands, as categories, are seen as an extension of self. Level two (middle and late childhood) characterises the child self-development concept through the child's ability to understand his/her self through the comparison process with others, where self-knowledge and, consequently, brand-knowledge are central. Level three (early adolescence), makes use of the self-evaluation elements of levels one and two and develops further such that the child is able to make assessments of his/her self in terms of popularity and attraction. At this level, the child's brand associations are central to the self-concept, more specifically such categories as popularity and acceptance are becoming important for the development of self (Ji, 2008; Damon & Hart, 1988). It is important to note that, as the child becomes older, more brand categories become more relevant to their lives and, consequently, their self-concepts are further motivated to develop a greater number of brand relationships (Ji, 2008). Furthermore, Ji (2008) argues that girls will be more motivated to form relationships with girl-orientated brands, whilst boys will be more motivated to develop relationships with boy-orientated brands. It is argued above that intimacy is another motivation category for the development of the relationships with brands however, according to McAdams *et al.* (1988), the motivation to form relationships with brands based on intimacy does not occur amongst children until they reach the 11 to 14 years old category and is, consequently, perhaps not relevant to this research, however, it will be taken into consideration. Interestingly, Ji (2008) makes the assumption in her

theoretical contribution that girls of school age are more likely to form a relationship with a brand based on intimacy than boys. Again, this is another factor which will be taken into consideration because girls and boys in equal numbers are subjects of this research.

It is acknowledged above that consumers' identity projects are central to CCT. At the same time, the nature of brands and their cultural and social relative importance is also clearly discussed above. Consequently, it is clear that brands and their symbolic meanings play an important role in the consumer's identity project. Therefore, in this research, the child's self-identity will be acknowledged as a consequence of the relationships they form with brands.

The aspects of brand symbolism cannot be ignored here. The phenomenon of consumer's communication of self-concept, through the products they select, is widely studied by scholars (Belk *et al.,* 1982). Furthermore, the authors argue that children view certain product categories (such as cars and houses) as objects of aspirations if judged as symbols of successes. Relevantly, Elliott & Leonard (2004) emphasise the significant influence of peer-pressure over children's consumer behaviour. Furthermore, the authors argue that the need of the child to fit in with his/her peers is one the motivations for desiring a particular brand with particular symbolic meanings. Additionally, Elliott & Leonard (2004, p.357) demonstrate 'how children want to own the branded trainers that their peers do in order to enable them to have equal status in the eyes of their friends'.

Furthermore, Elliott & Leonard (2004) use the term of "symbolic self-completion" in order to explain the children's strong motivation to own a branded product. Pointedly, Elliott & Leonard (2004) recognise the relevance of the Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) research which focuses on the concept of brand community and they claim that children can be seen as members of a symbolic brand community as they share the same feelings about particular fashionable brands (for example *Nike*). Also, children are able to transfer brand personality into their own individual identity and this is demonstrated by Elliott & Leonard (2004). Their research shows that children are doing so by wearing Nike's fashionable trainers as they make them feel "cool" and popular. Therefore, Elliott & Leonard (2004) emphasise that children's symbolic meanings of brands is

used to have/form stereotypes about other individuals who obtain certain brands. They argue that:

> 'the children form stereotypes about the owners of trainers: if the trainers are obviously branded and expensive the children believe the owner to be rich and young, if the trainer is unbranded and inexpensive looking the children believe the owner to be poor and old' (p.347).

Therefore, this section acknowledges the significance of CCT and brand symbolism for children's identity projects. The following section is dedicated to the exploration of the existing literature on children as consumers and their brands. This is a significant step in this research which helps us to understand better the importance of brands in children's lives.

2.13 Children and brands – existing research

Interestingly, the consumer literature on adult relationships with brands is growing, where self-concept is widely covered, as earlier discussed. This section explores the existing literature which addresses different aspects of children as consumers and their brands. It begins with the scholars who mainly use developmental principles to study children and then explores the alternative approaches.

Chaplin & John (2005) make the point that there is lack of research concerning the role of brands in identifying and expressing the self-concept of the child. One of the central questions in the research of Chaplin & John (2005, p. 119) is '… at what age children begin to incorporate brands into their self-concepts?'. Chaplin & John (2005), it is noted, are grounding their research on the principles of developmentalism, which is mainly based on the Piaget (1999) work and commonly used by sociologists and consequently, by marketing researchers, in order to study child-consumer practice. More specifically Chaplin & John (2005) refer to the changes during the different age periods of children's self-concept representation. They argue that for better understanding of the child's view of a brand, the focus should be 'from middle childhood (ages 7-8) to early adolescence (ages 12-13)' because at this age period the child is more able to think abstractly about brands and themselves (Chaplin & John, 2005, p.127). Additionally, they claim that children do develop self-brand connections and these connections become more complex as the child's self-concept becomes more

sophisticated within the process of maturity. Additionally, Ji (2002) supports the idea that children aged between 7-13 do develop the relationships with a wide range of brands. However, the fact that the age of the children chosen for her research is only based on the idea that 'brand preference is originally expressed during the ages 7-18' which was developed by Guest in 1964 is viewed critically in this research in terms of its limited age group (Ji, 2002, p. 371).

Additional research based on the developmentalism paradigm is conducted by Achenreiner & John (2003) who argue that children relate to brands on two different levels: perceptual and conceptual. They recognise that the current generation of children are more brand conscious than any before. Their research and that of others acknowledges the power of such brands as *Gap*, *Nike* and *Abecrombie & Fitch* (Leonhardt & Kerwin, 1997; Zinn, 1994) and bring to attention that special stores are opening to provide such brands to children (*Abecrombie Kids*, *Gap Kids* and others.). These authors recognise that ever-younger children are conscious of brands and that they are active consumers. Significantly, Achenreiner & John (2003) comment on the fact that there is a lack of research exploring the brand meanings and importance to children. Furthermore, they provide evidence that brands are important to children and this importance grows as they become older. Achenreiner & John (2003) seeks to establish if young children perceive brand-meanings differently from older children and are interested primarily in connections between such categories as the consumer judgment process and brand name meaning. They conclude that young children (younger than 8 years old) relate to the brand on a perceptual level, where they are able to recognise brands and ask for them by name. However, older children (over 8 years old) relate to the brands on both perceptual and conceptual levels and demonstrate an ability to think abstractly about them, attributing symbolic meanings as well personality characteristics. Furthermore, Ross & Harradine (2004), conducting research amongst children between the ages of 5 and 11, identify a strong correlation between age and brand awareness and consequently the effect that this has on the decision-making process. Ross & Harradine (2004) claim that children between ages 4-11 are able to express their brand preferences and moreover, the authors identify that children have a need of belonging which they can satisfy through the particular brand. Furthermore, children at the age 9-11 stage do see brands as symbols of status and use them in order to differentiate themselves from their peers (Ross & Harradine, 2004).

Unlike other authors discussed so far, who frequently use the Piaget (1970) theory and consequently John's (1999) contribution, to explain patterns of child behaviour in the context of consumption, McAlister & Cornwell (2010) apply the "theory of mind" in order to explain the child brand symbolic understanding, arguing that it is more appropriate to the marketing discipline. This is because modern psychology researchers 'need to assess individual differences in children's social relationships and higher-order cognitive ability' (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010, p.204). Simply put, "theory of mind" is a stage of development at which a child is able to think about the mental states of others as well as their own. The "theory of mind" and brand symbolism understanding are connected as, in order to understand brand symbolism, a child must be able to think about the feelings and thoughts of other people and have a language ability to express them (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). It is important to emphasise here that "theory of mind", it is generally accepted, occurs from the age of 3 and is not relevant to the research here (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). The main contribution of McAlister & Cornwell, (2010) is that brand symbolism understanding begins at the age 3 to 5 years old stage, significantly earlier than Piaget's (1970) model suggests (7 - 11 years old).

Whilst not specifically considering brands, Easterbrook *et al.* (2014) also argue that children (age 8-15 years) do have an understanding of consumer culture's "symbolic meanings" and "culture ideals" and how they can be used in order to gain social status, or used in order to "fit in" and be accepted by peers. They further argue that media is playing the role of facilitator of such processes. Additionally, Easterbrook *et al.* (2014) identify that there is a link between children's well-being and the consumer culture ideals. Significantly, Ross & Harradine (2004, p. 21) indicate the following themes in their research of children and branding: "cool", "older" such that they "would not be left out". Another theme more fully discussed above, recognises the use of brands in order "to be different". Additionally, Nairn *et al.* (2008) explore the "cool" concept and children's interpretations of this concept in relation to brand symbolism. They identify that "cool" is 'a highly negotiated concept which does not adhere to an object or person in a straightforward manner' (Nairn *et al.*, 2008, p. 633). Furthermore, Belk *et al.* (2010), in their paper fully exploring the history and meaning of the "cool" concept, argue that the "cool" concept has become a principle source of status among teenagers. Additionally, Granot *et al.* (2014) recognise "cute" as another significant phenomenon and language of popular consumer culture which originally formed as a category in Japan. Granot *et al.* (2014) emphasise that this concept is organised around different

theoretical categories of CCT such as consumers' personal and collective identities, lived worlds of consumers, their experiences and sociological categories. Young consumers and adult consumers (especially females) actively rework and transform the symbolic meanings of "cute" encoded in brands, advertising and material goods (Granot *et al.,* 2014).

This section has reviewed the existing literature which addresses different aspects of children as consumers and their brands. This is a significant step made in order to better address the existing gap which is acknowledge in section 2.11. The following section of the Literature Review explores the existing literature on children's brand relationships specifically as this is the main focus of this research.

2.14 Children's brand relationships – existing research

Earlier sections of this Literature Review have discussed fully brand relationships in the context of adults and, to a lesser extent, teenagers as portrayed in scholarship. Additionally, a gap is identified which shows the neglected position of the child in consumer culture research. More specifically, in this research children's relationships with brands is the main focus for exploration. The section below is devoted to the current literature of children in the specific context of brand relationships.

Ji (2002) makes an early attempt to argue that children do have relationships with brands. She uses the same approach to study children's brand relationships as Fournier (1998), where the principles of interpersonal relationship theories are used in order to explain and explore the phenomenon. More specifically, it is argued, that two individuals are in a relationship if the past interaction of these two participants is represented in their memory (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). This principle of interpersonal relationship theory is used by Ji (2002) to identify the existence of the relationship between a child and a brand. In other words, children establish a relationship with a brand if she/he 'stored their past interactions with a brand in their memory' and at the same time, if they are able to retrieve the stored information about the brand under the right circumstances' (Ji, 2002, p.372).

Additionally, the social environment of child brand relationship is taken into consideration by Ji (2002). The following socialisation agents are considered: family;

peers; and mass media. Furthermore, Ji (2002) applies two types of data analysis: idiographic and across-person. The across-person analysis identifies 10 types of children's brand relationships which are explained through the interpersonal relationship metaphors (Table 2.4 Ji's (2002) 10 different child's brand relationships):

Table 2.4 Ji's (2002) 10 different child's brand relationships (with explanations)
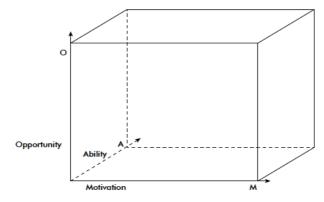
10 Children's brand relationship categories	Explanations
First love	A deep and meaningful feeling towards the brand that will be carried forward into future experiences with same product category-brands. This relationship type provides strong meaning in terms of gaining competence and self-concept development.
True Love	This type of relationship requires repeated experience with a particular brand, whereas similar product-categories from different brands maybe experienced but the child will always favour their "true love" brand. True love brand relationships feature strong attachment and high commitment.
Arranged Marriage	This relationship type is characterised by the child being introduced to the brand by parents, relatives and/or peers. The child has positive experiences with the brand and illustrates a preference towards it. It is possible that these positive experiences will develop to form stronger relationship types such as true love.
Secret Admirer	This type of relationships occurs when a child has a desire to possess the brand but is unable to obtain it, usually because he/she lacks the finances to do so.
Good Friend	A child considers a brand a "good friend" when he/she considers that it has desirable characteristics such as a pleasant taste. Primarily, this relationship type develops with experiences of food, drink and restaurants.
Fun Buddy	The main characteristics of this relationship type are a playful, fun and enjoyable experiences.
Old Buddy	Here a child has fond memories of experience with the brand and wishes to repeat it. It is possible that the child has limited experience with the brand but the positive memories are so strong that he/she has a strong desire to repeat it.
Acquaintance	The lack knowledge and feelings about the brand are central to this type of relationship. The child does not have much experience with the brand and therefore has no affection for it.
One-night Stand	Unlike the "arranged-marriage" relationship which is characterised by strong and positive feelings towards the brand, the "one-night-stand" relationship type is used to explain indifference towards a product provided by a parent or carer. Soap and toothpaste are such products.
Enmity	The feeling of "hate" or strong dislike are central to this type of relationship. These feelings are formed either by personal negative experience or by negative reports from other people.

Source: Adapted from Ji (2002)

It is important to recognise that Ji (2002) makes a significant step forward to understand better the importance of brands in children's lives. She claims that relationships which children have with brands are important for their daily lives and they serve certain important roles. These include dream-fulfilment, competence, growing-up, life enjoyment and importantly, connecting with others in society. Additionally, she stresses

the importance of marketers' gaining understanding of these early relationships because children are future and current consumers.

Ji (2008) develops further the concept of children's brand relationships by providing a theoretical framework of the potential of children's brand relationships. Viewing children as a potential brand relationship partner, she stresses that potential to do so is based upon their motivation, opportunity and ability to do so. Ji (2008) develops the three-dimensional cube to explain this potential (Figure 2.2). Significantly, all three dimensions must be present for a child's potential to form a relationship with a brand. That is to say a child must have some degree of opportunity, ability and motivation in order to be a potential relationship partner (Ji, 2008).

Figure 2.3 Children as potential relationship partners (CPRP): MOA space

M: motivation (self-concept development and intimacy motive)
O: opportunity (direct and indirect contacts with brands)
A: ability (cognitive, affective and acting abilities)

Source: Ji (2008, p.605)

Furthermore, Ji (2008) formulates a definition of the child-brand relationships:

> 'The child-brand relationship is a voluntary or imposed bond between a child and a brand characterised by a unique history of interactions and is intended to serve developmental and social-emotional goals in the child's life' (p.605).

However, this definition is criticised by Robinson & Kates (2005) [incorrectly referenced by Robinson & Kates, 2005] because they argue that it does not identify the important aspects of interdependence and intimacy in the brand relationships as identified by Fournier (1998).

Robinson & Kates (2005) explore children's socialisation into brand relationships in order to better understand brand consumption by children. Having, like Ji (2002), established that children do form relationships with brands, they reveal that four

relationship styles are present. These are: uber-brand relationship, lifestyle relationships, fad relationships and phase relationships. These relationships styles are distinct and frequently dependent on marker involvement. The uber-brand relationship refers to the child having a strong and passionate commitment to the brand and is evidenced by the child collecting several product categories of the same particular brand, thus giving them multiple opportunities to interact with it. Here, the marketing activities are playing an important role. The "lifestyle relationships" style, on the other hand, is evidenced by a child collecting 'different brands and participating in activities with common meanings across product and activity categories' (Robinson & Kates, 2005, p.578). The marketers' influence here depends on the particular activity category. The third brand relationship style is "fad relationship" style which lasts a short period of time but is intense, where the duration is dependent on marketing activity and peer-stimulus. The final relationship style is "phases relationships" where marketers' activities are less important than the child's attraction (pull) to the brand. This style lasts longer than the "fads style" but it is equally intense (Robinson & Kates, 2005).

Robinson & Kates (2005) recognise that children as young as five years old could be an active brand relationship partner. Interestingly, they explain that fads of children do not last long (usually a few months), that children's passion and commitment are mainly stimulated by marketers promotional activities and peers' influences rather than 'a child's individual pull towards a brand, attracted by its perceived characteristics' (Robinson & Kates, 2005, p.578). Therefore, the fad relationship style characterises children's relationships with brands as being short-lasting and primarily driven by "short-lived passion".

The phenomenon of fads is not new in the marketing discipline, The following table (Table.2.5) provides definitions of this concept:

Table 2.5 Definitions of fad

Author/Authors	Definition
Levy & Weitz (1995, p.286-7)	'A fad is a merchandise category that generated a lot of sales for a relatively short time – often less that a season… Fads are often illogical and unpredictable'
Perreault & McCarthy (1999, p.227)	' …an idea that is fashionable only to certain groups who are enthusiastic about it'
Kotler *et al.,* (2008, p.572)	'Fads are fashions that enter quickly, are adopted with great zeal, peak early, and decline very fast.'
Lilly & Nelson (2003, p.255)	'A temporary state of unusually high sales driven by consumer enthusiasm and a desire among consumers to purchase a product or brand largely because of its immediate popularity'.

Kotler *et al.* (2008) explain that fads are popular among individuals who seek excitement, trying to standout and wish to interact with others (motivational factors). However, 'fads do not survive for long because they normally do not satisfy a strong need or satisfy well' (Kotler *et al.,* 2008, p.572). Lily & Nelson (2003) comment upon the ideas provided by Kotler *et al.* (2008) and suggest that motivational factors, which are provided by Kotler *et al.* (2008) (above) can be seen as "strong needs" and therefore, fads are important for individuals as they help to interconnect and express their individualities. Therefore, Lily & Nelson (2003, p. 254) clarify that 'even a novel and quirky fad purchase may offer considerable value, signalling that important needs are being met'.

Byrne (2013) suggests that the success of fads can be explained through the categories of "cool" and "fitting in" as motivating factors to desire fads. These categories are explored in the literature by different scholars who study children as consumers in different contexts. For example, by Elliott & Leonard (2004), Nairn *et al*. (2008), Belk *et al*. (2010), Aledin (2012) and Auty & Elliot (2001). Research by these scholars is addressed in the Literature Review of this research project within this chapter. Moreover, Byrne (2013) highlights that fads very often represent a particular moment in time. The classic examples of fads are the Rubik's Cube, Hula hoops, Tickle-Me-Elmo with more recent examples being Fidget Spinners and Loom Bands, all of which highlight the cultural and sociological importance of fads. Furthermore, Byrne (2013, p.74) explains that 'a fad is a toy that people want not because they particularly care about it, or even like the toy itself – they want it because everyone else has one' and this

is what primarily differentiates a fad from a popular toy. This again supports the idea that fads can satisfy the need of acceptance.

Interestingly, consumer culture literature mainly suggests and recommends to businesses to sustain long-lasting relationships with brands in order to achieve long-term business success. The latter refers to the concept of "trends" which marketers aim to pursue as one of main factors for marketing success. Kotler & Keller (2006, p.136) clarify that 'a trend is a direction or sequence of events that have some momentum and durability'. Furthermore, Letscher (1990) provides some ideas regarding how a fad can be differentiated from a trend which leads to the ideas of how a new development might be a successful trend:

> (1) if it is matching basic values and lifestyle trends. Here the recognition of the additional/ relevant trends, which reinforce the new development, is important;
>
> (2) if the satisfaction of the need occurs in a short-term period. Here, Letscher (1990, p.24) argues 'changes that have only deferred long-term benefits or that require significant trade-offs are more likely to be short-lived fads';
>
> (3) if the new development 'can be modified to meet individual needs or be expressed in different ways by different people' then it has an opportunity to become a trend (Letscher, 1990, p.24).

An interesting idea is proposed by Lindstrom (2004) who argues that children clearly recognise the difference between fads and popular brands, and that they understand the concept of long/short-lasting brand value. Therefore, children as consumers engage with fads and trends with the understanding that they have time-limits and children can switch brands once it has stopped providing benefits. Furthermore, Lindstrom (2004) clarifies that brands (fashion brands in this case) which belong to the category of trendy/current fads are described by children as "cool", fun and hold high levels of acceptance in that most people will like it and these brands are potentially attractive to children. Martensen (2007, p.110), supports this notion by arguing that 'tweens prefer some brands simply because these brands are accepted by the group or are popular among the trend-setting and popular members of the group'.

Therefore, it is clear that both trends and fads satisfy children's needs of being cool, fun and acceptable. However, some brands fail because they are not able to satisfy children's 'timeless emotional need' and they over-rely on the appeal of the fad. For

example, some 'licensed kid-cereal brands … they had carried successful names based upon movie or character, like Ghostbusters, but their taste or texture was not good enough or unique enough to entice a loyal customer' (Del Vecchio, 2010, p.30).

Whereas Robinson & Kates (2005) seek to identify purely brand relationship styles, Rodhain's (2006) focus is on how brands are involved in the process of the child's identification. She brought together such categories as brands and the identification process of the child. In her research, she adopts the progressive evaluation model of identity which was developed by Erikson (1972). Importantly, in her research, the identity is seen as a process of interaction between two or more people. She applies the Erikson (1972) model which posits that a child's identity develops over eight distinct age-ranges beginning with its mother's influence and, as his/her "world" expands, it includes family, peers, school colleagues and, eventually, society in which he/she interacts. At the same time, brands are seen as significant and meaningful elements for the self-identification construction. Rodhain (2006) focuses on children aged between 10 and 11 years old because Erikson's model suggests that brands will be playing a very significant role in the creation of a child's identity at this time of their lives. Her research, which was conducted in the school environment and focused on clothing, revealed five significant levels in the identification process. These are: brand as a gender-identification medium; brand as an age-group identification medium; brand as a peer-group identification medium; brand as a family-identification medium and brand as a cultural identification medium. Rodhain (2006) concludes that all five levels in the identification process are deeply entwined and, importantly, that parents and teachers act as gatekeepers, thus preventing children for expressing their full identity in the school environment. The central finding of this research is that children's identity construction occurs through the interaction with others (parents, siblings, peers, teachers and media characters) who are important to them, at the same time brands also can be seen as a significant symbolic component of the identity which they can obtain and display.

Chaplin & John (2005), in line with Escalas &Bettman (2003), explore the development of self-brand connections amongst children and adolescents. They argue that the following should occur in order to sustain the connection:

-   'consumers must possess brand associations that can be related to the self, such as user characteristics, personality traits, reference groups, and personal experiences;

- consumers must possess a representation of their self-concept—such as the actual self, ideal self, or future self—that includes characteristics and traits that can be aligned with those possessed by brands; and
- consumers must engage in a comparison process to determine whether the perceived brand images are congruent with aspects of their self-concept' (Chaplin & John, 2005, p. 120).

Finally, Rodhain & Aurier (2016) argue that brands are embedded in a social context and are used by children to communicate with others and engage with fashion trends. Brands, they argue, are part of children's everyday lives and their social interactions with others (parents, peers, teachers and others). Therefore, the highly social nature of brand relationships is emphasised. More specifically:

> '… a lack of coherence between their parents, peers, and teachers, as well as between their own desires, weakens their brand relationships and particularly affects their self-esteem' (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016, p.85).

Therefore, it is clear that research on children and their brand relationships is growing and will continue to grow because, as identified in this chapter, marketing scholars have recently recognised the value that the New Sociology of Childhood can bring to this scholarship and this thesis aims to extend the children's brand relationship theory further by adopting this approach and, consequently, position children in CCT. Play and play activities are a significant part of children's lives and regardless of the fact that these are not directly relevant to the children's brand relationship theory, their consideration here is valuable for gaining a deeper and wider understanding of the children's world. The following section explores this phenomenon.

2.15 The role of play in children's lives

Play would appear to be a well-known and straightforward activity, however the theoretical conceptualisation of play is complex. Sutton-Smith (1997, p.1) argues 'when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness'. Scholars from different disciplines such as anthropology, biology, theatrical studies and literacy refer to play activity form the different perspectives, illustrating that play as a phenomenon is 'an activity which is complex, multi-faceted and context-dependent' (Marsh 2010, p.24). Sutton-Smith (1997) clarifies that children's play, especially in

childhood education, is usually related to the category of progress which means that through play a child is developing, adapting, socialising, obtaining cognitive, moral and social growth. Interestingly, the author stresses that the aspect of enjoyment is not discussed traditionally in the context of children's play and that it is more frequently discussed in the context of "play as fate" (as applied to gambling and games of chance). Furthermore, Canning (2007, p.228) argues 'play is an essential part of childhood'. Furthermore, she claims that through the play activities, children develop their preferences, communication and social skills and consequently, they begin to better understand their own selves and develop their own characters and explore different emotions (Canning, 2007). An interesting idea, which covers the complex nature of play is proposed by Wood & Attfield (2005, p.7) who argue that play is:

> '... infinitely varied and complex. Play represents cognitive, cultural, historical, social and physical interconnections, involving dialogue between reality and fantasy, between real and not real, between real worlds and play worlds, between past, present and future, between the logical and the absurd, between the known and the unknown, between the actual and the possible, between safety and risk, and between chaos and order.'

Furthermore, another interesting view on play is proposed by Meckley (2002) who seeks to provide an explanation of what play actually is for children. She refers to play as an activity or event which is chosen by a child, which means that children have their own ideas of the rules and what they would like to do. The play activity, she argues, belongs to them alone. Play activities are also invented by children and through the play they develop their thinking and creative skills. Also, children play "real life" (through the pretending), and consequently, it helps them to better understand their world. Play, opines Meckley (2002), is a powerful learning source through which children develop communication skills through play activities.

The role of parents should not be overlooked in the context of play as they provide appropriate conditions and environments for play activities, however they cannot plan children's play, according to Meckley (2002). Wood & Attfield (2005, p.5) acknowledge the views of Meckley (2002) and add that 'play is where the activity of childhood is occurring'. Another significant aspect of play acknowledged by Meckley (2002) is the fun aspect of play. She explains that play for children is an enjoyable experience which is based on their own ideas and motivations. A similar argument is

proposed by Wohlwend (2015), who argues that through play children are able to practice their social skills which contributes to the formation of the real world around them. Additionally, Ironico (2012) states that children attach meaning to things through the play and gain an understanding of the commercial world through this activity in this way. More importantly, during the play activity, children can experience a sense of empowerment as they are autonomic, to some extent, in their play activities (Canning, 2007).

Wohlwend (2015, p.548-549) defines play 'as a set of imaginative practices that change the meanings of ordinary artefacts and alter opportunities for social participation' and it, he argues, enables children to pretend and consequently, 'mediate imagined worlds'. Additionally, Wood & Attfield (2005) argue that play is paradoxical and that it includes a dialogue between many categories, for example between fantasy and reality and real and not real. The authors here highlight significant points, these being that children have their own understandings and definitions of play, they are actively creating meanings, symbols, determined rules and actions in order to create a shared awareness with the other children.

The role of media which contributes to the popular culture should not be overlooked in the context of children's play. Children engage daily with popular culture through video games, films, advertisements, clothing, books, physical toys and other artefacts which are transmitting different stories to them. Engagement with popular culture contributes to the children's play activities and facilitates their fantasies and, in this context, Cohen (2007) argues that toys are more than just "intellectual tools", rather they are "springboards" for children's fantasies and are an important part of their lives. Interestingly, Dilalla & Watson (1988, p.287) argue that 'the child comes to perceive the world as having both real and fantasy elements simultaneously; thus the child engages in fantasy while keeping track of reality', therefore children differentiate reality from fantasy and can switch from one to another.

It is important to acknowledge the category of "pretend play" because this activity helps children to merge themselves in the world of fantasy. Bergen (2002, p.3) clarifies that 'pretend play requires the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically; it is furthered by interactive social dialogue and negotiation; and it involves role taking, script knowledge, and improvisation'. Pretend play, therefore, contributes to the

development of creativity, imagination, emotions and facilitates the development of creative problem-solving skills (Russ, 2004; Hoffman & Russ, 2012).

In relation to the ideas above, Parsons & Howe (2013) argue that children are willing to play with superhero brands, primarily because these brands provide children with access to the imaginary powers and control which are missing in their daily lives. Play/pretend play transports children into a fantasy world where they can learn, develop different skills, socialise, enjoy spending their time and experiencing a degree of empowerment. However, Canning (2007, p.235) provides an interesting and critical idea that, through fantasy play, 'the child goes from being empowered in their fantasy world to being disempowered through the realisation of the power the adult holds in interrupting or stopping the play.'

Lindstrom (2004, p.29) opines that children are daydreamers, they are not constrained by the "traditional thinking" and through their imagination they can live 'in a boundary-free world'. However, the author stresses that a modern child's imagination is restricted by popular media and less by his or her own creativity which is required in order to sustain fantasy. Lindstrom (2004, p.31) clarifies that 'youngsters are no longer fantasy-driven but fantasy-receiving'.

In summary, play and pretend play are essential parts of childhood. Through play, children practice and learn different skills, develop who they are and obtain an understanding of the world around them through a wide variety of play activities. Play fulfils their real and fantasy worlds and provides them with opportunities to develop their personalities and relationships with others. Furthermore, not only play sustains meaningful experiences in children's lives but also events such as Christmas and birthdays provide elements of fulfilment in children's lives. These are explored below.

2.16 Surprise, delight, Christmas and birthday parties – meaningful lived experiences in children's lives as consumers

Interesting and contemporary insights into Young Consumer Behaviour are presented in Gbadamosi's (2018) publication of the same name which are relevant to this thesis. For example, Sethna *et al.* (2018) claim that children's lives include many experiences which evoke feelings/emotions of "joy" and "surprise", opine these authors. For

example, they, referring to Plutchick (1980) state that 'most experiences will be new to the child and where those experiences are pleasurable they will be delightful' (Sethna *et al.*, 2018, p.160). These authors, also using the contribution of Kumar *et al.* (2011), argue that the birthday party experience, including all involved activities, provides a source of both surprise and a delight to a child. Kumar *et al.* (2011), it should be noted, examine customer delight in order to learn more about its associated emotions. By way of conclusion, Kumar *et al.* (2011, p.22) report 'that delighting guests entails the emotions of joy, thrill and exhilaration'. Torres & Ronzoni (2018) summarise the literature on delight and argue that the research on delight is strongly linked to the concept of customer satisfaction, however current research lacks clear and conceptual measures of customer delight. Interestingly, Arnold *et al.* (2005) conducted research into delight pertaining to the shopping experience which is part of CCT and whilst this (shopping experience) is not the focus of this research, it is considered here.

Delight, as an emotional response to interaction with a product or service, represents the highest level of positive consumer experience according to Vanhamme & Snelders (2001) and this is especially pertinent when it comes to brands because, in order to evoke the feeling of delight, brands must provide high levels of both utilitarian and emotional satisfaction. Academic definitions of "delight" vary little with, for example, Guillemain (2012, p. 2) offering: 'the emotional imprint left on a customer who attributes the rich, positive and memorable feelings produced by an experience to a business or organisation' and Patterson (1997, p. 224) suggesting that customer delight is 'going beyond satisfaction to delivering what can be best described as a pleasurable experience for the client'. Oliver, Rust & Varki (1997) analysed the perceptions of marketing practitioners relating to customer delight and opine that evoking delight is achieving above and beyond mere customer satisfaction. Rust et al. (1996, p. 229) provide a simple synopsis of the delight debate explanation in terms of 'businesses need to move beyond mere customer satisfaction, to customer delight'. However, evoking positive and memorable experiences and/ or exceeding customer expectations and thus delighting consumers of brands is a more complex and challenging phenomena because of the complex meanings which are attached to them in addition to their utilitarian characteristics (Levy, 1959; Hirschman, 1986 and others). Simply put, to evoke delight, as defined by Guillemain (2012) and Patterson (1997), a brand must provide combined positive utilitarian and emotional responses simultaneously.

In general, a positive customer experience leads to customer satisfaction and, from the managerial perspective, customer satisfaction matters only if it leads to favourable behavioural intentions (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). Many marketing scholars, it should be noted, study he concept of customer delight as a significant contributor to customer loyalty which resonates with brand relationships (Schneider & Bowen, 1999).

The psychological view of customer delight is also recognised by marketing practitioners, where the dimension of emotion is central. Kumar *et al.* (2001, p.22) studied delight from the psychological perspective and argue that delight is a combination of two emotions which customers achieve from their positive experiences of: joy and surprise. The idea of incorporating the "positive surprise" aspect with delight is accepted by scholars such as Oliver (1989), Westbrook & Oliver (1993) and others whose research is focused upon customer satisfaction/delight. The originator of the "surprise and delight" term would appear to be Plutchik (1980). However, Kumar *et al.* (2001) propose that, regardless of the well-developed notion that emotions of surprise and joy contribute to feelings of delight, feelings of joy can stimulate customer delight without the high level of arousal (surprise). Kumar *et al.* (2001, p.22) conclude that, on one hand 'delight is an emotion comprised of joy and surprise', and on the other hand, 'consumers experience of delight is when they are captivated (or aroused) by an event which evoked feelings of joy in the consumer'.

Special events such as birthday parties and Christmas, notwithstanding cultural and religious differences, provide a rich ground for consumer culture researchers to study children's consumption practice. Arguing that Christmas to children is more about 'having things' than a religious/ spiritual occasion, Halkoaho & Laaksonen (2009, p.248), whose research involved interrogating children's letters to Santa, found that the majority of the letters were expressions of 'needs, wants, desires, hopes and dreams'. Christmas, and its tradition of gift giving has become highly commercialised and has spread beyond its prior religious boundaries and, as Halkoaho & Laaksonen (2009) reveal, together with birthdays, it is to many, especially children, a significant opportunity to receive material gifts.

The role of marketing practitioners and media/mass media cannot be overlooked in the process of commercialisation of such events as Christmas and birthdays with regards to children. Marketers heavily influence the formation of gift requests and they carry this

out by playing a major role in the creation of children's desires and hopes as well as creating and broadcasting the associated symbolic meanings of consumer products (Elliott, 1997; MacInnis & de Mello, 2005). Caron & Ward (1975), in their research, clarify that children primarily referred to the television (followed by friends) as the main source of the gift ideas. Furthermore, Clarke (2006, p.283) proposes that 'children are encouraged to request gifts, parents want to give gifts and under the guise of Santa Claus, they respond to requests by giving gifts that they deem appropriate'.

Scholars clearly acknowledge the materialistic nature of such events as Christmas and birthdays to children and adults alike. For example, Goldberg et al. (2003, p.281) argue that American youths are highly responsive to advertising/promotional activities and 'the most materialistic youths thought their parents should spend an average of $96.76 for a birthday gift and $129.00 for a Christmas present'. However, Belk (1989, p.131) argues that marketing efforts and media messages are oriented towards building 'a mythology of Christmas as a time of love, family, generosity, charity, and other Cratchit-like values' and therefore there is very little chance that the sacred status of Christmas is disappearing in the UK, at least. Therefore, Christmas represents commercialism as well as 'materialism, hedonism, sensuality, and sociability' (Khan *et. al.,* 2018 p.293).

Young (2005, p.22) argues that 'the hedonistic aspects of consumption are often discussed by consumer researchers in various journal articles and there is no reason to restrict the debate to adults only'. Following this line of thought, Halkoaho & Laaksonen (2009) conducted interesting research where they investigated the Christmas festival and children's gift requests addressed to Santa in order to better understand children as consumers. Significantly, their research focused on children and their own views as opposed to those of the gift-givers, which supports Young's (2004) recommendation. Halkoaho & Laaksonen (2009, p.250) propose that children are 'very brand oriented in their gift requests'. The contribution to research of Halkoaho & Laaksonen (2009) provides fascinating insights into the materialistic desires of children. It involved different request styles which reflect children's views on Christmas and gifts in general and ranges from "the likely to receive list" to the "unlikely but wish to receive list". One list, involving a sample of 202, revealed that children knew very specifically what kind of gift they wanted/ hoped to receive for Christmas. The "wish list" for these children frequently included more than two specifically branded gifts. The

second style of request list, amongst a sample of 65 children, involved a shorter, more carefully considered gift list. The third request list made by children is referred to as the "Dream come true" list and involved a sample of 21 children and the authors revealed that 'this implies that wishes are highly imaginative and based on a certain fantasy of becoming somebody (for example becoming a princess) or having something (for example, a pony) that is not currently possible' (Halkoaho & Laaksonen, 2009, p252). The fourth category is named as "The choice of Santa Claus". Children (13 in total) in this category generally requested unspecified gifts which should provide a surprise from Santa Claus with one child clearly stating his/ her desire for Santa to 'choose whatever he would like to give' (Halkoaho & Laaksonen, 2009, p.252). The last category in the research project represents children who hold more traditional and less commercialised beliefs and generally possessed a greater understanding of Christmas. Letters in this sample of children expressed ' faith that Santa Clause can fulfil any request, even to accomplish an impossible task' (Halkoaho & Laaksonen, 2009, p.253). Children in this group wrote very explicit letters in a very emotional and unselfish way. Halkoaho & Laaksonen, (2009, p.253) conclude their paper by arguing that 'Christmas could be called a festival of shopping for branded toys for kids' and emphasise that, regardless of the children's age, they hold highly evidenced rational thinking. However, the authors admit that there is evidence that children understand and engage with the traditional Christmas values as their letters reflect gratefulness, greetings, good wishes for other people and reciprocity. In the context of the Christmas festival, it is important to recognise that, whilst its commercialisation is spreading to non-Christian faith countries, it is, at its core, a Christian occasion and has little or no spiritual significance to very many people outside the Christian faith.

Together with Christmas, children's birthdays provide another major opportunity to children to have their materialistic desires met. The commercialisation of birthday parties for children is evidenced through the growing number of specialised services, products and commercial merchandising. Modern home-birthday parties are frequently organised, themed and carefully selected for the child (for example: fairies, Frozen, Harry Potter and other popular commercialised stories). Rook (1985, p.252), in defining such ritual as 'a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviours that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time', argues that children's birthday parties are a good example (of ritual) and comprises four key

elements which are special food and gifts, a ritual script, performance roles, and invited family and friends.

Many commercialised organisations such as MacDonald's, KidZone and Pizza Hut offer a range of food and activity options for hosting children's birthday parties. Therefore, it is very clear that children's birthday parties are an important, social, commercial and ritualistic event which continues to acquire significance in contemporary consumer society (Clarke, 2006). The children's birthday party, as a ritual occasion, has been studied by Otnes & McGrath (1994) who have used the framework of consumption rituals in order to investigate how children socialise on such occasions. In their research, they have confirmed the highly gendered nature of this occasion, for example it emerged in their research that girls are more concerned about specific party related artefacts whereas boys are more interested in activities and games.

Birthday parties and other similar occasions play a significant role in the lives of children and their parents where the participation/preparation itself for such events is important. For example, Cook (2011) proposes that parents' and children's active engagement with the preparation for parties connects them with commercial culture which combines to create meaningful rituals. Furthermore, Jennings & Brace-Govan (2014, p.107) propose that mothers navigate children's commercial activities and 'teaching [their children] the importance of relationships over materialism through their children's birthday parties as these were occasions where these forces intersected.' Consequently, this section of the Literature Review chapter shows the importance of such concepts as surprise and delight; Christmas and birthday parties for children's lived experiences and for children as consumers.

Summary

The Literature Review illustrates the complex nature of both CCT and brand relationship theory. Brand relationship theory is recognised in this research as a significant part of CCT. This review of the relevant literature emphasises that existing consumer culture literature and brand relationship theory position consumers as active beings and emphasises that consumer culture provides meaningful resources to consumers for the construction of their identities and consequently, their worlds. The concepts of brands and the associated brand relationship theory are fully presented and

discussed. More specifically, this Literature Review acknowledges the importance of the symbolic nature of brands and explores the essence of brand relationship theory. Furthermore, children's position in social science research is explored and the principles of New Sociology are acknowledged as a valuable alternative to the more commonly used developmental psychology approach to study children as consumers. Moreover, the neglected position of children in CCT is clearly identified and existing research on children as consumers and their brand relationships is provided and reviewed. The Literature Review demonstrates that very little is known about children as active consumers and their relationships with brands. Consequently, this review shows that children are not well represented within consumer culture research. Furthermore, it is evidenced that very limited research addresses children's brand relationships specifically. Having identified that little research exists concerning children's brand relationships in the CCT arena, the research question of this study is: what role do brands play in children's lives? The following chapter explains how the research question is to be addressed and the methodological aspects of this research are presented.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter is devoted to discussion of, and the clarification of the methodology which was used in this study. It begins by providing a clear statement of the research rationale and research questions. Furthermore, this chapter presents, discusses and clarifies the complex nature of the different research philosophies. It provides a clear statement of the adopted research philosophy and its associated ontological and epistemological positioning. It makes the argument for the adoption of the interpretivist philosophy and the qualitative methodology which was used. A significant part of this chapter is devoted to discussion regarding research processes involving children where an emphasis is placed on the ethical issues, competence to participate in the research and children's engagement with the research process as this is highly significant to this research project. Furthermore, the sampling strategy of the research is discussed and articulated in which the relevant literature is reviewed in order to justify children's age selection (5-9 years). The in-depth, semi-structured interview method was used in this research and the details/ results of the pilot study are presented. An account of how the thirty-one interviews involving children of both genders were conducted is also provided, followed by details of how the data was analysed and interpreted. The chapter ends with the discussion and justification of the research approach, critical reflectivity and summary.

3.1 Research rationale and research questions

In relation to adult consumers, CCT advances our understanding of consumption and consumer behaviour (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, from the CCT perspective, consumers are seen as active individuals who, through consumption and the symbolic meanings of brands, define themselves and locate themselves in a social world (Levy,1959; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1988; Patterson & O'Malley, 2006; Fournier, 1998). The active position of consumers in relation to the purposive use of the symbolic meanings of brands is well clarified in consumer brand relationship theory which is a significant scientific area of CCT, as discussed in the Literature Review and was initially developed by Fournier (1998). She emphasises the importance of the brand relationships for consumers' lives, explores the purposive nature of these relationships

and stresses that these relationships are playing significant roles in consumer identity projects. The brand relationships theory is one of the central theories underpinning this research because the existing literature reveals that our understanding of children's brand relationships is limited and only very few papers address this concept in a direct manner (Lopez & Rodrriguez, 2018; Rodhain & Aurier, 2016; Ji, 2002).

The research goal of this study was to understand more fully how children as active consumers use brands and how these brands support them in their daily lives. This goal originates from the ideas of Cook (2004, 2008), Martens *et al*. (2004) and Cody (2012) who identify the neglected position of children in CCT and Nairn *et al*. (2008) who explicitly argue that the CCT approach is very useful in providing understanding of children's interactions with brands and their symbolic meanings. These aforementioned ideas were fully explored in the Literature Review preceding this chapter.

It is important to highlight that the child in this research was seen as an active participant of the social world and, as such, is an important part of our scientific understanding of consumption and consumer culture and, therefore, their presence and practices must be recognised, considered and investigated (Corsaro, 2005; Cook, 2004). This position of children in this study originates from the principles of New Sociology, where children do 'produce their own peer world and culture', according to Corsaro (2005, p.24). Since children are recognised in this research as active consumers, the research here seeks to establish whether children have meaningful and purposive relationships with brands and reveal how their brands support them in their daily lives. This research aimed to reveal children's own opinions, views and lived experiences with brands. Moreover, this research aimed to explore the aspects of their personal and social lives in order identify the importance of brands within them.

Significantly, the ontological and epistemological positions are not always easy to identify during the research process, therefore, it is recommended to formulate a clear research aim which is reflected in the research questions (Mason, 2002). The main aims of the research here were to (1) further develop the children's brand relationship theory and (2) interpret the relationships children have with brands. Consequently, this study had the main research question: What role do brands play in children's lived experiences and identity projects? Furthermore, this research had additional research questions which were:

1. How do children's brands relationships support them in their everyday lives?
2. What is the nature of children's consumer brand relationships?
3. How do brands support children's consumer identity projects?

In order to answer all research questions, the following objectives needed to be met which were:

- to explore children's understanding of the symbolic meanings of their brands;
- to gain deep understanding of how children use the symbolic meanings of brands in their personal and social lives; and
- to gain an understanding of different aspects of children's social and personal lives from their own perspectives (in the context of the school environment, their homes and with their parents and friends).

Having clarified the research rationale, aims and questions, it is important to clarify the complex nature of academic research before moving to the discussion of the research philosophies and the adopted research philosophy in the current study.

3.2 Complexity of social research
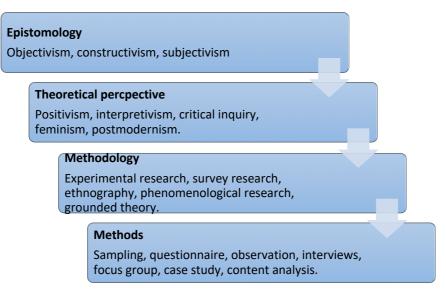
The fundamental aim of the marketing researcher is to explain and describe the social science phenomena which is complex in its nature (Healy & Perry, 2000). Research is the process whereby the researcher seeks to obtain knowledge in order to describe, explain, and further improve the overall understanding of the social world which leads to the knowledge contribution in a specific field (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Oliver, 2010). Furthermore, the research philosophy characterises the way the researcher sees the world and, further, underlines the overall research strategy, methods and research design (Saunders *et al.,* 2012). However, there are many different methodological philosophies which reflect different ontological, epistemological and methodological components of the research project. The identification of the appropriate research philosophies can be a challenging task because there are many overlaps, conflicts and contradictions between them.

Despite the challenges associated with the complex nature of social science research philosophies, it is important for researchers to choose and apply methods carefully and conscientiously (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993). The methodology is determined by the

research philosophy and its ontological, epistemological beliefs and by assumptions about human nature, according to Healy & Perry (2000) and Carson *et al.* (2001). A research philosophy contributes to and shapes the research design which then 'leads the researcher to ask questions pertaining to how responses to research questions will be gathered' (Coolican, 2009, p.19).

This research adheres to the suggestions and recommendation of Crotty (1998) in relation to its research design and research processes because he recognises the complex nature of social research, its terminologies, ideas and philosophies. He further proposes elements of the research design which provide 'a sense of stability and direction' and allow the researcher to develop an effective and individual research process (Crotty, 1998, p.2). Figure 3.1 illustrates these elements of the research process as suggested by Crotty (1998).

Figure 3.1 Elements of the research process

Epistomology
Objectivism, constructivism, subjectivism

Theoretical percpective
Positivism, interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism, postmodernism.

Methodology
Experimental research, survey research, ethnography, phenomenological research, grounded theory.

Methods
Sampling, questionnaire, observation, interviews, focus group, case study, content analysis.

Source: Adapted from Crotty (1998)

Furthermore, the proposed elements are applied and adapted (to some extent) for the research design of this research project. The following section is dedicated to the exploration and discussion of the research philosophies which is an essential step for academic research.

3.3 Research philosophies: Interpretive philosophy and positivist philosophy

The previous section of this chapter clarified that, in social science research, there are many different and, at times, contradicting research philosophies. This research acknowledges the contribution of Burrell & Morgan (1979) who argue that scholars' understanding of social reality dictates/shapes the subjective-objective approaches to the research and reflects different philosophical positions. Furthermore, significant research is put forward by Guba & Lincoln (1994) who identify four categories of scientific research paradigms/philosophies: positivism, realism, critical theory and constructivism. More recently, Proctor (2005) argues that traditionally academic researchers belong to the two competing schools of different thoughts: positivism and phenomenology. In relation to the context of marketing research, some authors refer to the positivism and interpretative philosophies/paradigms (Bradley, 2010; Saunders *et al.,* 2007). Since, there are many different terminologies and contradictions between them, this research relied on the significant research and ideas of Hudson & Ozanne (1988, p.508) who argue that 'two of the predominant approaches to gaining knowledge in the social sciences are positivist and interpretive approaches'.

The research methodology here aligns with Hudson & Ozanne (1988) who use the labels of positivist and interpretive philosophies/paradigms. These labels include some other positions: the interpretive philosophy which, according to Hudson & Ozanne (1988, p.509), includes 'subjectivism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and so on' and positivism which includes 'logical positivism, the received view, logical empiricism, modern empiricism, neo-positivism, foundationalism, and objectivism'.

Although many different philosophical assumptions and terminologies exist in social science research there are elements which have to be addressed in order to gain a better understanding of these two philosophies. Guba & Lincoln (1994), as well as Burrell & Morgan (1979), identify three essential elements of the research paradigm/philosophy which are traditionally acknowledged by researchers during their research processes and generally help to conceptualise social science. These elements are ontology, epistemology and methodology.

In this research, interpretive and positivist philosophies were compared on the basis of ontological and epistemological assumptions in order to position this research and justify the methodological choices (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). See Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Comparison of interpretive and positivist philosophies

	Interpretive philosophy	Positivist philosophy
Ontology refers to 'whether 'reality' is of an 'objective' nature, or the product of individual cognition; whether 'reality' is a given 'out there' in the world, or the product of one's mind.' Burrell & Morgan (1979, p1.)	- multiple realities which are very complex because they are socially constructed; - these realities exist and change over time and under the different contexts; - researchers view each reality holistically within the meanings which are created in the specific context; - the separation of reality is impossible as it will change the created meanings; - research aims to understand and explore the phenomenon and the main focus is 'on meanings people bring to situations and behaviour, and which they use to make sense of their world and these meaning are essential to understanding behaviour' - social beings are viewed as active individuals who create and shape their own environment through their interactions; - role of the researcher is complex because the understanding of the world and phenomenon has to be obtained from the research participants' points of view.	- reality is single and objective; - reality consists of distinct elements which can be allocated into "causes" and "effects" and therefore, reality is seen as a structure of sophisticated relationships between different parts; - the individual's perceptions exist independently from this reality and the nature of social beings 'holds a deterministic view'; - research applies formalised techniques, accurate observations and measurements in order to explain and test any hypotheses; - laboratory approach is used to understand, explain, test the relationships between sophisticated elements of reality which can be taken away from the natural context and placed under controlled settings.
Epistemology Refers to what can be known: it is the philosophical study of knowledge and is concerned with questions such as what is possible to know and how it is possible to know it' (Hackley, 2003, p.93). 'What might represent knowledge or evidence of entities or social 'reality' that I wish to investigate?' Mason (2002, p.16)	- phenomenon is studied in a particular time and place in order to understand, explore and '… determine motives, meanings, reasons, and other subjective experiences that are time-and context-bound'; - individuals understanding originates from the social interactions and culture. The understanding is a learned phenomenon and it contributes to the sense of individuality which is not purely ours alone; - role of the researcher is active as he/she is a part of the social reality together with the participants of the research because they guide and provide the researcher with information. - the relationship between researcher and participant requires the former to be flexible and adaptable during the research and data collection processes. - the data collection techniques are more unstructured and more guided by the informants	- the researcher and subject exist separately and the researcher does not influence the subject in any ways which make it possible to achieve objectivity; - tends to reach generalisations which will be free from context and time; - aims to identify causal linkages between different categories where the data collection techniques are based on the laboratory experimentations - 'seeks to explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements'.

Source: Developed from: Punch (2013); Lindgreen (2008); Saunders *et al.* (2007); Mason, (2002); Carson *et al.* (2001); Hackley (2003); Hudson & Ozanne (1998); Hirschman (1986) and Burrell & Morgan (1979).

Once the differences between the ontological and epistemological positions of the two different philosophies (interpretive philosophy and positivist philosophy) have been acknowledged, the researcher should pay attention to the differences in the methodological aspects of positivism and interpretivism. Furthermore, the researcher will be able to understand, justify and develop an appropriate research design in order to complete the research intellectual puzzle (Mason, 2002). Having explained these two philosophies, it is important to precisely clarify the adopted research philosophy in this research and its consequential methodology.

3.4 Adopted research philosophy, research ontology and epistemology

This research project was exploratory in its nature where it sought to understand and interpret the relationships children have with brands and gain a deeper understanding of the role that they play in their lives. Relevantly, Belk (2006) strongly emphasises the interpretative nature of research which represents CCT. Also, previous research which focused on brand relationship theory has successfully used interpretative research in order to understand consumers' everyday lives in relation to the specific contexts (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016; Kates, 2002). Furthermore, this research formulates the main research question which is: What role do brands play in children's lived experiences and identity projects? Therefore, this research adopted the interpretivist philosophy where the main focus was on gaining an understanding of the phenomenon and exploring it fully. The context of this research is consumption, more specifically the lived experiences that children have with brands at home, in school and in other social settings. The informants were children who were studied in the "here and now" and who were given an autonomic position (to some extent). More specifically, in line with Hudson & Ozanne (1988, p.510), the research here viewed children as individuals who 'actively create and interact in order to shape their environment'.

Significantly, the realities investigated here are constructed by the participating children and the researcher did not ignore the other agents of these realities such as parents, siblings, media and others. Having explained that, it is important to note that the research here adopted a holistic view on the child's reality and made attempts not to view it as a sum of different parts. Significantly, the understanding of the phenomenon in this research is a process which is constantly evolving. The researcher aimed to gain very specific details of children's brands, their relationships with them and explore their

significance in their lives. The main interest of the researcher was children and their perceptions, feelings and emotions towards brands. Moreover, this research sought to understand and explore the symbolic meanings of children's brands and how children use these meanings in their lives. This refers to the interpretative approach which Holbrook & Shaughnessy (1988, p.400) claim is needed in order to 'explicate meanings embedded in consumer behaviour'.

It is important to start the discussion with the ontological and epistemological assumptions in order to create an interpretative framework of beliefs which guided the research project (Bradley, 2010). Here, careful consideration was given to the 'different ontologies, epistemologies and models of human nature which are likely to incline social scientists towards different methodologies' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p.2). In this respect, Table 3.2 shows the ontological, epistemological and methodological positioning of this research project.

Table 3.2 The ontological, epistemological and methodological positioning of this research

Elements of research design	Recommended questions to answer	Application to this research
Ontology/ "human nature"	What is a "child"? What is childhood? Tisdall *et al.* (2008, p.73)	Children as active beings who create their own world through the interactions with different agents. The children's social world is viewed holistically and in its natural context. Children have their own unique experiences with the brands, their own perceptions, emotions and feelings. Children are able to state their subjective views and identify themselves subjectively within their social groups.
Epistemology	What can we know about children and childhood? Tisdall *et al.* (2008, p.73)	Children's personal lived experiences with brands is one of the main focuses of this research. The researcher aims to determine meanings which children create around particular brands and understand the role of these brands/meanings in their lives. The researcher assumes that children's reality cannot be fragmented. Children are seen as experts of their own lives, in a particular time and place. Children are taking an active role in the research and data collection process. The role of least-adult is adopted in this research in order to minimise the power-difference between researcher and informants.

Methodology	'A set of procedures, practices and principles for obtaining knowledge about the world' Tisdall *et al.* (2008, p.73)	The qualitative methodology is adopted because the aim of this research is to explore and understand children's relationships with their brands.
Methods	'A particular methodology will prescribe certain methods of data collection' Tisdall *et al.* (2008, p.73)	Individual interviews and focus groups (at initial stage of this research) are used to collect data.

One of the main aspects which characterises the research here as interpretivist research is that the social reality here was perceived through the subjectivist approach. In other words, each child's subjective experience was perceived as a contribution to the social reality and the research here aimed to understand 'the way in which the individual [a child] creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p.3).

In general, the provided characteristics of the elements of the research design for this research (see Table 3.2) are in alignment with Burrell & Morgan (1979, p.28) who claim that, in relation to the interpretive paradigm which is 'informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience'. Also, it is important to highlight that this research deployed elements of the phenomenological approach because brand relationship theory is primarily based on the assumption that individuals have some sort of lived experiences with their brands. Therefore, the research here adopted some principles of phenomenology because it is 'concerned first and foremost, with human experiences', also this research aimed to understand the phenomenon of child-brand relationships from children's own perspectives, in other words 'to see things (brands, others, themselves and world around them) through the eyes of others' (Denscobe, 2007, p.77-78).

3.5 Justification of the adopted research methodology: qualitative *vs.* quantitative

Since the ontological and epistemological differences of the two philosophies (section 3.3 above) are clarified above, the aspects of the methodological position of interpretative and positivist philosophies have to be clarified also. In other words, the justification for using qualitative research and/or quantitative methods is needed. The

methodological choice is shaped by the ontological and epistemological positions of the research which are clarified in Table 3.2 above. Therefore, the research methodology here was qualitative because the epistemological and ontological assumptions were exploratory in their nature. The differences of methodological approaches can be grouped into the following categories: research focus, the role of researcher in the project, techniques for data collection and sample size (Lindgreen, 2008; Proctor, 2005). In order to make the justification for the chosen methodology stronger, the research here provides differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 The differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies

	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Research focus	The research seeks to measure, describe and explain different categories. Researchers operate with numerical data. Quantitative researchers begin to define and isolate categories before the actual data collection.	Research focuses on the understanding, interpretation and exploration of the phenomenon. Research deals with non-numerical data (including written or spoken words, images, video clips and others). In qualitative research the categories change their definition during the whole research process.
The role of researcher in the project	The researcher is an external observer and personal involvement is minimal.	The researcher's roles are changing during the research process. Therefore, the researcher is active in the research processes as an assistant or information provider (especially during data collection). His/her own experience and knowledge are important for the production of unbiased and reliable findings.
Techniques for data collection	Questionnaires, structured interviews and observations and other techniques to collect data in order to examine and describe relationships and tendencies inside of the data where a variety of categories exists. Quantitative research includes questions which are not complex and require simple answers from participants.	In-depth interviews, focus groups, observations and others techniques. These techniques allow the researcher to study the phenomenon from the informants' points of view and gain understanding and explain the relationship between particular sets of categories. In qualitative research, it is not always clear for the informants what sort information is needed.
Sample size/data analysis	For quantitative research the size of sample might be important in order to more accurately describe the relationship between categories. Quantitative researchers traditionally use statistical techniques in order to measure the variables.	For qualitative research, it is not necessary to have such a large sample because the goal of this method is to recognise the categories which will help the researcher to understand how the social world is constructed. Data gathering in qualitative research stops when information gathered becomes "redundant" and a point of "saturation" occurs. In qualitative research the process of data analysis is analytical in its nature because the researchers are interested in the social world and human behaviour in the natural environment.

Source: Developed from Punch (2013); Saunders *et al.* (2012); Lindgreen (2008); O'Donoghue & Punch (2003); McCracken (1988).

Furthermore, the current study is positioned within CCT which has specific aims, according to Arnould & Thomson (2005) and covers such issues as:

> 'product symbolism, ritual practices, the consumer stories in product and brands meanings, and the symbolic boundaries that structure personal and communal consumer identities' (p.870).

Hence, these aspects and dimensions of consumption cannot be investigated purely through quantitative methods, and therefore, qualitative data and related methods are central to CCT (Arnould & Thomson, 2005; Belk, 2006). The research here is interested in, and sought to gain an understanding of, the symbolic meanings of brands which children use in their daily lives and consequently explore child brand relationships and the role of brands in their lives. Importantly, previous research on brand relationship theory frequently applied qualitative methodologies in order to gain deep understanding of the phenomenon (Kates, 2002; Ji, 2002; Fournier, 1998). The research methodology in this research project was qualitative, meaning that the research design continually evolved and research was open to 'new information' because of the complex nature of the realities (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988, p.513).

3.6 The research process involving children

It is important to clarify how children were viewed in this research and this is consistent with the view of Morrow & Richards (1996, p.100):

> '… in terms of methodology, researchers need to think carefully about the standpoint from which they are studying children, and the ethical implications of that standpoint'.

The children in this research were given an autonomic position and are seen as individuals who were able to shape the social environment around them and, at the same time, who were/are individuals who are shaped by it. Also, they were viewed as active social actors who were able express their thoughts, feelings, opinions and own perspectives. Therefore, the research method here was not based fully on the principles of developmental psychology, however, several of these principles, such as cognitive ability of participation in the research process were reflected.

Having identified the position of children in this research, it was very important to understand the complexity of such a position in order to be able to identify the entire research process in the most efficient and effective way. Punch (2002, p.231) stresses:

> 'It is somewhat paradoxical that within the new sociology of childhood many of those who call for the use of innovative or adapted research techniques with children, are also those who emphasize the competence of children. If children are competent social actors, why are special 'child-friendly' methods needed to communicate with them?'

Therefore, the main considerations in the current study were the ethical issues, the child's competence to participate and the need for a robust methodology which engaged the child with the research process. Consequently, the main considerations in relation to the research process were:

- the ethical issues such as (1) permission to conduct research, (2) confidentiality and (3) power over children;
- the child's competence to participate in the research project; and
- maximisation of children's engagement in the research process through the identification of the robust research method.

The focus of this research is on children and their brands, therefore, their own lived experience with brands and meanings which they are creating around these brands are significant for our further understanding of children's brand relationships. Baird (2013) argues that in order to learn about the lived experiences of children, it is important to obtain the information directly from children, rather, than from their parents/care givers. Therefore, the current research involved only children.

When children are involved in the process of research, ethical concerns become more crucial as they are seen as vulnerable beings (Gallagher, 2009). Therefore, the current study adopted the following principles: respect to participants, equity and non-discrimination. Also, the researcher assured that no harm would be done and protection of weak participants was assured. Green & Hogan (2005, p.65) refer to these principles as the set of rights which are needed to ensure 'self-determination, privacy, dignity, anonymity, confidentiality, fair treatment and protection from discomfort or harm'. Therefore, comprehensive details of this research were submitted to the UEL Ethical Committee and approval was successfully obtained (see appendix 1).

The following ethical consideration were adopted:

(1) Informed consent - permission to conduct research

Participants were made fully aware that they had the choice to participate or not and also that they could leave the research process any time should they have wished to do so (Greig & Taylor, 1999). The participants were fully informed about the research process as Greene & Hogan (2005) suggest and the following information was clearly explained to the children and their parents/caregivers:

- the aims and ideas of the research (children were told that the interviewer is writing a book at university and their contribution will help);

- if a child does not want to answer any of the questions, he/she is free not to do so;

- participants can stop the interview at any time and continue if/when she/he is ready to do so;

- no one will be able to identify who provided information (anonymity); and

- no one except the researcher will have accesses to data.

Children and their parents/ caregivers were provided with the consent forms and information sheets (appendix 2.3). Significantly, for children 5 years-old, a slightly different information sheet was created and provided (see appendix 3a). Parents/ caregivers were also given questionnaire guides in order to clarify the questions children were asked. The consent forms were signed by children and their parents/caregivers prior to the actual interviews.

(2) Privacy and confidentially

There are three elements of confidentiality which were applied in this research. The first element was public confidentiality and this refers to participants not being identifiable. This provided feelings of security. The second is social network confidentiality which refers to the idea that information gained during the research process would not be passed to the other family members, or the child's friends, or others. This element helped to facilitate honesty for both children and parents. The last element of confidentially is concerned with third-party breach of privacy. The researcher needed to be aware of the possibility that private information might be revealed during the group or individual research activities. Therefore, the general rules were explained and discussed with participants before the actual data collection began (Greene & Hogan,

2005). Children were also told that if they disclosed any information about dangerous positions/abuse of themselves or other children, the researcher would have to report this to both parents and relevant authorities (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

(3) Power and children

Mayall (2000, p.121) argues that children are aware that 'a central characteristic of adults is that they have power over children'. The power phenomenon can be explained through the fact that children are surrounded by adults during their lives and that they are dominated by them (Morrow & Richards, 1996). At the same time, Alderson & Goodey (1996, p.106) highlight a significant and relevant factor for this research: 'the main complications do not arise from children's inabilities or misperceptions, but from the positions ascribed to children'.

The researcher was aware of these generational issues at all times and also the fact that children simply 'are not used to being treated as equals by adults' (Punch 2002, p. 324). The following potential issues were identified: (1) during the interviews, the respondents might not give truthful information in order to please the interviewer and (2) in the process of interpretation of the data which can be explained through the fact that children's thoughts about themselves and their lives could be interpreted by the researcher from an adult perspective and therefore, objectivity might be missing (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Therefore, in order to minimise these potential issues, the role of least-adult was adopted in this research and much helped to generate reliable and rich data, develop the children's trust and reduce the power differential (Punch, 2002). Mayall (2000, p, 121) argues that adoption of the role of least-adult means 'blending in to the social world of children, not siding with adults, operating physically and metaphorically on the children's level in their social worlds'. Significantly, with each participant the practice of this approach differed in accordance to their unique personalities. Therefore, the following was deployed:

- friendly relationships were developed with each child and they were listened to carefully and with respect;
- finding out what was important to them;
- the researcher strived to use "children's language", avoiding technical terms and jargon;
- the researcher was seated such that eye-level was maintained;
- casual clothing was worn by the researcher; and

- at the ice-breaking stage, conversations included stories of the researcher's own childhood experiences but in a non-comparative and non-judgemental way.

The success of this least-adult approach was evidenced during the data collection because, for example, children frequently displayed reluctance to end the interview process suggesting that they enjoyed it and enjoyed explaining details of their lives and being listened to. Many were seemingly unaware that it was an interview and responded to questions more in the manner of a conversation with a friend.

That said, the researcher was always aware of the advice of Einarsdóttir (2007) that it might be difficult to adapt this approach because the researcher would find it extremely challenging to ignore his/her research and adult position.

3.7 Sampling strategy

The nature of this research required the adoption of a purposive sampling strategy to reach the respondents for the study. Snowballing sampling and convenience sampling are part of this purposive method (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Figure 3.2 (following) depicts the sampling method used for this research. This research focused on children in the 5 – 12 year old age category living in two London Boroughs (Barking and Dagenham). This age category is fully justified below in this section together with other specific essential characteristics. The sampling of this study was strategically selected, in part, to reduce the risks associated with gaining access to insufficient numbers of children as participants (Babbie, 2011; Ritchie & Lewis, 2006).

In quantitative research, random sampling is regular practice in order achieve generalisability, whereas in qualitative research, sampling is traditionally purposive and seeks to generate 'insight and in-depth understanding' as opposed to generalisability (Patton, 2002, p.230). Sekaran & Bougie (2003, p.227) makes clear that purposive sampling is 'confined to specific types of people who can provide the desired information, either because they are the only ones who have it, or conform to some criteria set by the researcher'.
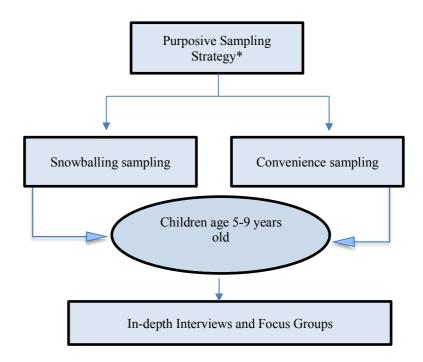
Snowballing (or chain) sampling is described by Miles & Huberman (1994, p.28) as a method which 'identifies cases of interest from people who know what cases are

information rich'. According to Riley *et al.* (2002), the snowballing sampling method is a valid and valuable approach to recruit participants in qualitative research and has been used in a wide range of social science research projects including those researching the brand relationships phenomenon. This approach, according to Riley *et al.* (2002, p.87) 'involves identifying a member of the population of interest and asking them if they know anybody else with the required characteristics'. It should be noted here that the explicit characteristics required of the participating children are fully described and discussed below. Therefore, participating children were reached initially through several parents with whom the researcher has personal connections. These parents were then asked to distribute the recruitment/ advertisement brochure (see appendix 4) in their neighborhood in order to invite other parents and their children to participate in this research project.

Convenience sampling is a widely used approach to recruit participants in both quantitative and qualitative research. In convenience sampling, the sample is selected because it is a sample of the population which is accessible to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Miles & Huberman (1994, p.28) acknowledge the purpose of convenience sampling and explain it in simple terms, that is to 'save time, money, and effort'. Qualitative researchers, it should be noted, traditionally use non-probability samples where the specific characteristics of the population are the basis for the selection (Ritchie & Lewis, 2006) and this is the case in this research.

Figure 3.2 below shows how children were reached in order to participate in this research. Below the figure, the essential criteria for children's participation in this research is discussed and justified.

Figure 3.2 The sampling method used in this research

*- The three main criteria are discussed below

The sampling strategy in this research was, therefore, purposive and aimed to gain data directly from children in order to answer the research questions. It is important to clarify that the ontological position of this research was clearly identified and justified earlier in this chapter (section 3.4). The Literature Review chapter also supports this ontological position. Consequently, the data was purposively collected directly and only from children in keeping with the advice of Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam (2003, p.78) who clarify that a purposive sampling strategy is one in which:

> 'the sample units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study'.

Furthermore, in the context of children, brands and their relationships with these brands, the following characteristics were used for the age selection of the participants for this research. These were, of sufficient age to:

1) understand the symbolic meanings of brands;

2) possess a well-established brands awareness;

3) have the ability to participate in the research.

It is important to re-iterate that the research here was qualitative in its nature therefore, the 'researcher comes into the research environment with some knowledge or preunderstandings', however is still open to 'new information' (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988, p.513). The first and second developed characteristics above are part of the preunderstandings of the brand relationship theory which is central to the research here. These characteristics are extensively explored in the Literature Review chapter and were considered to be significant in the context of consumer brand relationships theory. The third characteristic is logical for the research which aimed to study children and their own opinions and thoughts. The following section describes these characteristics in greater detail.

(1) Understanding of the symbolic meanings of brands

This research took the position that understanding of the symbolic meanings of brands, according to the literature, begins at the age of 7 and develops further as children grow older. This position has been developed from reviewing the literature of scholars interested in this topic and their arguments are presented in Table 3.4 (below)

Table 3.4 Arguments made in relation to children's age and understanding of the symbolic meanings of brand/ possessions

Author/ Authors	The arguments
Achenreiner & John (2003)	Consumption symbolism is playing a significant role for children's integration into a consumer world. Children who are 7-8 years old are able to recognise consumption symbols because they are able to think symbolically, which refers to the developmental psychology approach.
John (1999)	The author draws attention to the relation between "age-related improvements in cognitive abilities" and "consumer knowledge". Children are able to think more abstractly within the symbolic thoughts refers to the "analytical stage" and the age for this is 7-11 years old.
Menzel et al. (2006)	Research with children aged between 8-13 has been conducted in order to explain the symbolic meanings which children are allocating to souvenirs. Their research shows that children at the ages of 10-12 years old do understand the symbolic meanings of their possessions.
Nairn et al. (2008)	Their research based, on the principles of CCT, critically observes the developmental approach to study children's symbolic consumption. They identify that children aged between 7-12 do understand the symbolic meanings of brands and use these meanings in order to negotiate their gender identities.

(2) Children and their brand awareness

The existing literature suggests that children as young as 2 years old have some level of brand awareness and this was a significant factor for the current research in order to

study children and their relationships with brands. Valkenburg & Buijzen (2005, p.466) were able to report that 'by the age of 2, children were able to recognise 8 out of 12 brand logos and by the age of 8, they were able to recognise 100% of the logos'.

Earlier, Achenreiner & John (2003) argued that children recognise brand names at the age of 3 or 4 years old. Furthermore, as children grow older the level of brand recognition and recall increases. By the time children reach ages between 7-8 years old they are able to name and recognise several brands under many products categories (McNeal, 1992; Rossiter, 1976; Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977). It is also recognised that children as young as 7 do request products by brand names as it is a source of product information (Otnes *et al*., 1994). These findings highlight the importance of brands to children. Furthermore, it is identified by Achenreiner & John (2003) that children who have reached the age of 12 are using brand names as cues to make consumer judgments. Significantly, brand awareness might be different between different brands and can be influenced by the child's level of cognitive development and the economic group to which he/she belongs (Guest, 1964).

(3) Children's ability to participate in the research

The current study, in line with the contribution of Baxter (2012), recognised the significance of obtaining data directly from children, as opposed to gaining it from parents/ caregivers, because it provided richer data which was used to better understand their relationships with brands and consequently, their position in consumer culture research. At the same time, before the main aspects of the methodology for this research are fully explained, it is very important to clarify at which age children are able to participate in marketing-orientated research. In other words, do they understand the purpose of marketing-orientated research and also what is their attitude towards it? Baxter (2012, p.459) argues that children in the 8 - 12 year old category 'had a good understanding of the purpose of research'. Additionally, it was identified by Baxter (2012) that children from 5 - 12 years of age have a positive attitude towards research.

Having researched the literature relating to children's understanding of brand attributes, it is clear that brand awareness occurs earlier (from 2 years old) than understanding of the symbolic meaning of brands (from 7 years old). However, children in age category of 5-12 years are able to participate in academic research. The existing research on children's brand relationship theory primarily involves children from the age of 7 years

old as driven by the developmental psychology principles (this is clarified in the Literature Review chapter). Consequently, the importance of including children who possess brand awareness together with the ability to participate in academic research was recognised as valuable in order to extend brand relationship theory which is an aim of this research. This shows that the current study recognises the significance of developmental psychology however is not solely reliant upon it. This research is driven by the principles of New Sociology which is also fully explained in the Literature Review. Therefore, this research broadly focused on children in the 5-12 age group because the research here was exploratory in its nature. It should be noted, however that, as a consequence of deploying the snowballing recruitment technique, children in the 5 – 9 year-old category participated in this research project.

3.8 The size of the sample

The size of the sample traditionally does not need to be large in qualitative research because researchers do not aim to achieve generalisations, rather they focus on the explanation and understanding of the phenomenon. However, Mason (2002) argues that the sample in qualitative research does not have to be small. She argues that the size of the sample should be a strategic decision which helps the researcher to address the research questions, focus on the research aims and provide sufficient data for meaningful analysis.

The term "sample size" originates from quantitative research, argues Trotter (2012), who elaborates on the qualitative sample size debate by pointing out that the key difference between the two approaches to gathering data is that data collection in qualitative research is an interactive process during which valuable data "emerges" during the process of interviews or focus groups. Data gathering in qualitative research stops when information gathered becomes redundant and a point of saturation occurs, according to Glaser & Strauss (2017) and Goulding (2005). In other words, no more interviews are conducted when 'all research questions have been thoroughly explored in detail [and] no new concepts or themes emerge in subsequent interviews' (Trotter 2012, p.399). In the case of this research, data collection continued until data redundancy occurred and the saturation point was reached. In order to reach this end-point, the researcher conducted interviews with thirty-one children of both genders (sixteen girls

and fifteen boys) in order to explain and understand their relationships with brands (Mason, 2002). See appendix 7 for demographic details of the sample.

Generalisability is a standard aim in quantitative research which is achieved through 'statistical sampling procedures' and permits the achievement of representativeness (Silverman, 2013, p.144). However, representation and generalisability are the categories which are not the primary focus of qualitative research. Both qualitative and quantitative research identify the criteria which justifies the sample, however 'when qualitative researchers decide to seek out people because of their age, or sex, or race, it is because they consider them to be good sources of information that will advance them toward an analytical goal and not because they wish to generalize to other persons of similar age, sex, or race' (Sandelowski, 1995, p.180). In this research, the analytical goal is to investigate the role that brands play in children's lives and the people with the necessary information are the children who meet the selection criteria discussed above in section 3.7. In support of this position, Wainwright (1997, p.11) argues that 'the rationale of conducting in-depth interviews … is the quality of the insight that is important rather than the number of respondents that share it'. In relation to this point, it is the quality of the insights gained from the respondents which will, when rigorously analysed, answer the research question. Therefore, qualitative research aims to achieve saturation and, consequently, gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

3.9 Research methods

The clear age range for participants in this research was identified and significant aspects of child-focused methodology are acknowledged and next, it is important to identify/ clarify the data collection method/methods. The method of data collection is driven by the epistemological and ontological positions of this research discussed earlier in this chapter.

Since this study was interpretivist research involving children, the research originally aimed to use multiple-methods to collect the necessary, valuable and rich data. At the very initial stage of the research project the aim was to conduct both the dominant in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups methods. The combination of both was identified as the most suitable method to collect the data from children and is alignment with Hill *et al.* (1996) and Hill (2006) who argue that the combination of

qualitative methods, such as focus group discussions and individual interviews, are the most beneficial way of gaining a better understanding of children's views. Such methods have been applied successfully in earlier research, for example by Cody (2012), Ji (2002), Rodhain & Aurier (2016) and others (see Table 3.5 below). In order to get an understanding of the child's world and to help them feel more at ease, all interviews took place in their homes and/or homes of their friends.

Table 3.5 Examples of research methods involving children

Author(s)	Child's position in the research based on:	Research procedures
Ji (2002)	Developmental-psychology/consumer socialisation	Sample: 3 children; 7 years old girl and 2 boys, age 9 and 13, from the same family Data collection method(s): Individual and group interviews. Individual interviews were story-telling orientated. A game-playing method was used during both methods
Cody (2012)	"New sociology" ('doing childhood') and notions of 'commercial enculturation'	Sample: 15 children; 11-12 years old; all female Data collection method(s): personal diaries, in-depth interviews, accompanied shopping trips, e-collages and researcher diaries
Nairn *et al.* (2008)	Consumer Culture Theory principles	Sample: 148 children; 7-11 years old; both genders Data collection method(s): Phenomenological group discussions and a novel cork-board sorting method
Rodhain & Aurier (2016)	Developmental-psychology/consumer socialisation	Sample: 112 children; both genders Data collection method(s): observation and semi-structured interviews, focus groups

Significantly, in-depth interviews and focus groups were first trialled through the pilot phase of the research which is described in detail in the following section.

3.10 Pilot phase of the research and adjustment to the data collection process

The pilot phase of the research took place at the very initial stage of the research project. Two families were involved who had four and two children (both genders and aged between 5 and 9) as appropriate to the research here. Two visits to each family house took place over a one-month period. The purpose of the pilot phase was:

(1) To begin the process of building friendly, trusting relationships with the children and parents/ caregivers;

(2) To trial the least-adult approach (explained in section 3.6);

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(3) To trial the proposed data collection methods: in-depth interviews and focus groups. The main focus here was on trialling the procedure (no attempt was made to collect data):

    a. To ascertain if the proposed duration of the interviews were appropriate;

    b. To experience children's conversational language and adjust the proposed questions/ dialogue accordingly.

(4) To trial the exercises for children in the focus groups which was the creation of the birthday present list.

The first visit was purely introductory/ friendly, during this visit the researcher was introduced to the children and the process of building a friendly and trusting relationship with children began. The purpose of the second visits was to trial the proposed methods (semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups using the interview guides) for future data collection.

At this early stage of this research project the conversations with children in these families revealed that they were comfortable and happy to participate in the research project. The individual preliminary interviews revealed that these children demonstrated an ability to express their views and opinions clearly and whilst some questions needed either re-phrasing or added clarification, the participants provided potentially rich responses to the interview questions. It was noted also that the least-adult approach helped to minimise issues caused by the power differential as recorded in Section 3.6 above and also that the proposed duration of each interview (15-20 minutes) was appropriate.

It was observed during the preliminary interviews that some children got very distracted with the recording equipment (an iPad in this research) and also felt quite self-conscious about being recorded. This is in line with the findings of Kirby (1999) who encountered a similar experience. It was noted that, should children be distracted, careful hand-written notes would have to be taken in place of the recordings. Therefore, in this research, detailed notes were taken when it was not possible to record interviews.

Also, two preliminary focus-group meetings were conducted in order to trial the exercise originally planned for this research and that was asking them to make a list of

birthday-presents to give and receive (Appendix 5). Three children participated in each focus group. The overall result of the focus group activity was acceptable however, the dynamics of both were quite problematical in that participants failed to complete the given task, they drifted away from the given topics and were generally distracted by each other. Applying stricter rules was deemed inappropriate because it would/could have increased the power differential between the researcher and participants and also create a situation where the answers could be determined (Morrow & Richards, 1996). The task-based method of asking children to draw their answers (as opposed write them) if preferable, did work for some children, however other children drew random pictures and scribbles and did not focus on the given task.

Overall, the pilot phase of the research revealed that the in-depth semi-structured interviews would potentially generate data, which on its own, was sufficiently rich to help address the research questions. The focus-group interviews proved to be less successful and the decision was made to rely solely on individual interviews to collect data. However, it was recognised that focus group interviews/ activities might have a role to play in future research. This pilot phase also revealed the importance of building trusting relationships with the participating children and the decision was made to hold more than one meeting with each participating child.

Results of the pilot phase of the research were:
1 – Only individual in-depth interviews would be conducted to collect data;
2 – Children understand the research context and interview questions;
3 – The procedures of conducting the interviews is appropriate (including adoption of the least-adult approach.)

3.11 Research method: in-depth semi-structured interviews

Qualitative research, involving a small number of children over time produces rich, detailed understanding of their lives and this approach was adopted in this research and is supported by experience gained in the pilot study (Ji, 2002). Consequently, this research adopted in-depth semi-structured interviews which are inspired and determined by the interpretative philosophical position of this research and the overall ideas and research questions (Kvale, 1996).

The current study relied on the contribution of McCracken (1988) who argues that one of the specific characteristics of the qualitative individual interview is that it does not have an aim to determine the simple relationship and tendencies between categories, instead it seeks to help our understanding of the complexity of the social world through the categories and assumptions which might form it. Analysis of this data does, consequently, provide deep understanding of the particular research questions (Saunders *et al.,* 2007). Therefore, the research here adopted this single method in order to gain a deep understanding of the children's world and explore the role of brands within it.

There are numerous characteristics of the in-depth interview which distinguishes it from others and made it appropriate in this particular research project. The interactive nature is one of those differences, which means that the researcher was able to develop dialog in a way that respondents could be more open, talk more spontaneously and feel free to respond and act naturally. As a consequence, the data has meaningful characteristics (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). One of the specific features of this type of interview is that interviewees were active participants in the research and they have an influence on the research direction (Symon & Cassell, 2004). This fitted well with the autonomic position afforded to the children in this research. Through the use of informal (but semi-structured) questions the researcher was able to direct, explain and/or develop the children's responses which helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the children's brand relationship phenomenon (Saunders *et al.,* 2007). Therefore, the role of researcher was crucial in these interviews as the interviewer needed to use intellect, experience and imagination in order to be able to guide the interviews and treat interviewees in the appropriate way and then organise the data with appropriate results (McCracken, 1988). Further justification for such an approach with children was gained from Spratling *et al.* (2012, p.47) who provides evidence that there are scholars from different disciplines who successfully conduct qualitative research, which in some cases, is phenomenological in nature, and argue 'children are able to articulate their experiences.'

The adopted method in this research had elements of the phenomenological approach and sought to obtain descriptions of the children's lived worlds and their experiences with their brands as a part of their world. The research here adopted the ideas of Thompsons *et al.* (1989) regarding the value and approaches to conduct phenomenological interviews. They propose that they are 'perhaps the most powerful

means or attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experience' (Thompsons *et al.,* 1989, p.138). Furthermore, the interviews were semi-structured, meaning they had, in the words of Kvale (1996):

> '… a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there was an openness to change the sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told' by children' (p.124).

The research here carefully made use of a developed interview guide which included the main themes and questions relevant to each of the topics (Appendix 6). The conversations with children had a purpose which was supported and developed through the appropriate themes which originated from the theoretical part of the research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). These topics/themes and questions were used as a means of guidance and they were open-ended which enabled the interviewer to keep a level of control of the interview process and, at the same time, gain rich data which faithfully reflected the children's opinions and feelings towards their brands in their different life situations and their lived experiences with brands. The questions on which the dialogue was based aimed to gain a description of their lived experiences (i.e. they were not theoretical) with brands and role of the interviewer here was to provide the context in which children were able freely talk and describe their experiences with their brands. Therefore, the interviewer used the interview guide as a context-framework, however, the nature of the conversations were not strictly limited to the proposed themes and questions. There were three main social contexts in this research which were children's life at school, home and their social lives.

In order to be prepared for the interviews the following steps were undertaken which were recommended by Ghauri & Gronhaug (2005, p.127): '1) analyse your research problem, 2) understand what information you really need to have from an interviewee, and 3) see who would be able to provide you with that information.'

The face-to-face interactions were viewed in this research with caution, however. On one hand, semi-structured face-to-face interviews allowed the interviewer to closely focus on each child's views and opinions but on other hand, the interviewer was aware that 'children may be uncomfortable with the one-to-one setting' (Tisdall *et al.,* 2008, p.75). In the social and psychological literature, some scholars (Einarsdóttir, 2007;

Fraser *et al.,* 2004; Mayall, 2000, and others) urge caution when interviewing children face-to-face as they might feel intimidated, therefore, they suggest interviewing in pairs, or in small groups and this advice was taken. In order to minimise any uncomfortable situations for children, the least-adult approach was applied and is discussed in detail earlier in this chapter.

It is important to clarify that the research here sought to understand the role of brands in children's lives, where the lived experiences with their brands and other social agents were crucial for the understanding of the phenomenon. However, this research did not aim to explore the structure of the lived experience which Socha & Stamp (1995) claim to be the overall aim of the phenomenological approach but rather it sought to understand the purposiveness of child-brand relationships and investigate the values/benefits they gain from these relationships through the understanding of children's own explanations of their lives.

3.12 Conducting the semi-structured interviews

Thirty-one children between the ages of 5 and 9 were interviewed over a six-month period, fifteen were boys and sixteen were girls. The snowballing/ purposive sampling technique was used to recruit interviewees, which had the result that all thirty-one children were living in the London borough of Barking & Dagenham, East London.

All interviews took place in the children's homes, or homes of their friends, in order to help make the children feel at ease and also to gain a visual understanding of the children's "worlds". Efforts were made to make the children feel at ease by spending time with them before the formal interviews began and every effort was made by the interviewer to adopt the position of least adult. It was considered beneficial to interview the children more than once in order to gain a deeper insight into their lives and obtain richer data as they felt more comfortable with the interviewer over time. The average length of each interview was forty-five minutes. At the beginning of each interview an ice-breaking technique was used in order to create a more comfortable environment and support their confidence to participate in discussions. More specifically, they were asked general questions (How was your day? Any good news? and others) and in some cases children were allowed to try out the tape-recorder (iPad) or say few words about themselves which they clearly enjoyed.

Whereas it was initially considered important to try and interview the children in their bedrooms in order to gain a deeper understanding of the personal worlds, it soon became evident that very few of the children thought about their bedroom as their personal space and that very frequently the entire homes of the children were the areas in which they played, relaxed and stored their personal effects such as toys, computers and games. Consequently, the interviews did not take place in the children's bedrooms but in living rooms or kitchens of the children, where adults were present at all times but not involved in the interviewing process. Details of the interviewees (demographic characteristics) and interviews can be found in Appendix 7.

In a few cases the children were interviewed in friendship groups of two or three. None of the children appeared to be inhibited by the presence of parents and there was no evidence that responses of the children were affected by having adults present. Whilst much research took place on the techniques of interviewing children, certain challenges were encountered which required a flexible approach to recording the interview data. The aims of the interviews were carefully explained before the interviews began and the children were asked if they objected to having the interviews recorded. Furthermore, in some cases, parents claimed that they did not want the interviews to be recorded and this wish was respected. It also soon became apparent that children in this age category were apt to provide very short and direct answers to the open questions and much probing was needed to tease out the necessary and valuable data. When the interviews were conducted, each child was listened to very carefully in order to avoid any unnecessary disruptions of the flow of the conversation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). However, in some cases children were losing their focus on the topic discussion and breaks were taken. Significantly, during the interviews the focus was only on relevant data collection and there was an attempt to reduce any unnecessary comments. Once all interviews were conducted, each interview response was carefully transcribed for further, deeper analysis.

3.13 Data analysis and data interpretation

This qualitative research applied thematic analysis and elements of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to interpret the data. Kvale & Brinkman (2009) argue that:

'there are no standard methods, no *via regia*, to arrive at the meaning of what is said in an interview … no standard methods of text analysis exist to correspond to the multitude of techniques available for statistical analysis' (p.1932).

Therefore, this research followed the recommendation of Silverman (2016) who argues that qualitative analytic attitude is needed in order to provide good quality qualitative analysis. Such an attitude was developed in this research by engaging with the various approaches proposed by scholars in order to acquire an understanding of the principles of qualitative data analysis. Consequently, the thematic analysis and elements of IPA were deemed suitable for this research and its aim because children's own viewpoints on their lives and the roles of brands within them was central. Furthermore, in the context of brand relationship theory, it was important to gain an understanding of children's lived experiences with their brands in the broad context of their lives. From the outset, it is important to clarify that IPA was used to interpret the data because this research was particularly interested in children's own views on their brands and the roles of these brands in their lives.
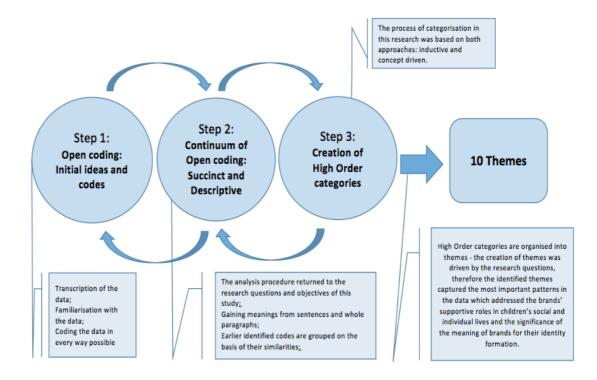
Throughout the course of the data analysis, the researcher was flexible and the interpretation was continuously changing until the whole process of data collection and analysis was complete, as Spiggle (1994) recommends. Furthermore, in this research the interpretation of the children's brand relationships, the uncovering of relevant meanings, and the understanding of the importance of brands in children's lives was based on a combination of (1) the children's own interpretation of their lives and brands/ brand relationships phenomenon and (2) the researcher's interpretation of the purpose of brands in their lives which is supported by existing theories and concepts. This is consistent with the idea of interpretative reading of the data as recommended by Mason (2002) and is in line with IPA which, as Braun & Clarke (2013) explain:

'acknowledges that the researcher cannot access a participant's world directly; the researcher also makes sense of the participant's world using their own interpretative resources' (p.181).

Consequently, in this research, the double hermeneutic approach was used to interpret children's words in which they described their lived everyday world and the importance of brands within it.

Having clarified the basis for the interpretation of the data, the following illustrates the analytical stages of data organisation, analysis and on-going interpretation. The analysis of the data in this research was based on the assumption that 'to analyse means to separate something into parts or elements' (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p.193). Furthermore, the transcripts were seen in this research as "living conversations/tools" which assisted and supported the extension of the knowledge about children as consumers and the roles of brands in their lives. This research undertook a number of analytical procedures and manipulations with the data in order to answer the research questions which resulted in the formation of ten themes which were developed and are presented in the following chapter. These activities are closely related to the procedures and principles of grounded theory, however the grounded theory method was not adopted in this research. Such use of grounded theory in this context is described by Browne & Clarke (2006, p.8) as 'grounded theory "lite"'. Steps of the coding process are presented in the Figure 3.3 below:

Figure 3.3 Steps of coding process

Step 1:

Firstly, after each interview, the audio-tape and/or notes were carefully transcribed and checked for accuracy. The transcription process was an initial step essential to data familiarisation and during this written process, initial thoughts and ideas were noted.

Then, each transcript was carefully read to gain a thorough understanding of each child's life in a broad context and to identify behavioural and emotional tendencies related to brands for each participant. Next, the transcripts were read line-by-line in order to identify initial codes, labels and terms. For example: brand-names/brand awareness, social places, children's hobbies and others simple categories. This open-coding process is explained by Glaser (1978, p.56) as 'coding the data in every way possible ... running the data open'. At this stage, it was important to be familiar with each transcript and organise data meaningfully before moving to the next stage of the analysis, therefore each transcript was read repeatedly, critically and analytically.

Step 2:

Next, the analysis procedure returned to the research questions and objectives of this study in order to retain its focus. Then, reading of the transcripts moved away from line-by-line reading towards gaining meanings from sentences and whole paragraphs. At this stage of the process, earlier identified codes, terms and labels were grouped and linked together on the basis of their similarities. Furthermore, the re-organisation of codes at this stage was reflecting the ontological and epistemological positions of this research. For example, the identified codes represented parts of the data which were recorded as meaningful-to-children experiences with brands, children's own interpretations of the brand-meanings and other aspects of their lives and relevant brands. At this stage, the researcher also checked to ensure identified codes were applicable for the whole data set. Also, relevant to this research, repetitions were identified across transcripts. Examples that emerged included such categories as "super-hero brands", "experts", the "Apple brand" and others. At this stage of coding the descriptive and conceptual comments were noted which reflected the lived experiences of the children and meanings they were attaching to their brands as interpreted by the researcher. Consequently, a variety of meaningful succinct and more descriptive conceptual codes were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Examples of these codes are provided in the Table below (Table 3.6). This stage was a continuum of the open coding process and, in this research, it is conceptualised by Taylor & Bogdan (1984):

> 'in the constant comparative method the researcher simultaneously codes and analyses data in order to develop concepts; by continually comparing specific incidents in the data, the researcher refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another' (p.126).

Table 3.6 Example of some of the descriptive codes and their meanings

Supporting statements	Meaning	Code
Apple is a cool brand everybody knows that. I only want an Ihpone not any other brands	A child perceives/associates a brand as a cool phenomenon which is highly important in his/her life	Cool brand – Apple
I play at home… most of the time I am a Spiderman, I have my costume you know… so I hide and catch bad people	A child engages with the fantasy world where brands are an inseparable part of it. Engagement with the fantasy world is an essential part of children's lived experiences .	Super-hero brands- integral part of a child's fantasy world and his/her play activities

Step 3:

The meaningful succinct and/or more descriptive conceptual codes which emerged from step 2 were then grouped into more abstract high-order categories and included interpretations of the data. The process of categorisation in this research was based on both approaches: inductive and concept driven. In other words, the prior careful engagement with the relevant literature (Chapter 2) which explores the nature of the brand relationship concept and the phenomenon of children as consumers has been essential for the identification of the self-identity, brand/brand-symbolism, children's lives related elements/codes in the data. At the same time, the inductive approach allowed the researcher to identify new original codes/categories directly from the collected data. At this stage of data analysis, it was important to identify the common patterns of children's experiences with their brands, brand's symbolic meaning to them and their behavioural and emotional responses towards them because these were the drivers for the creation of the high order categories. This was in keeping with Goulding's (2002, p. 77) notion that open-coding ends when the 'researcher sees some sort of pattern emerging'. The high-order categories were revealed and examples are provided in Table 3.7:

Table. 3.7 High-order categories (examples)

Self-esteem, self-enhancement, purposiveness of the brand relationships, brand associations, brands symbolism, the importance of brands – essential role of brands, self-definition, technological era, competence, connection to the technological era, desired self-image, self-presentation, shared and individual symbolic meanings, popular brands, acceptance by peers, social context, self-construction, self-achievements, "cool", gender-identity, supportive role of brands, need for social interaction, liminal stage, symbolism of adulthood and childhood, children's age transitional period, fantasy and brands, superheroes, imagination, self-identity, self-expansion, children social relationships with brands, parents' lived experiences with the brands, brand preferences, sense of community, children's affiliation, children's life-projects – hobbies, interest, sense of belonging, entertainment, functional characteristics of the brands, emotional benefits, fantasy world and superheroes brands, superheroes, imagination, self-identity, self-expansion, self-construction, positive lived experience, purposive brand relationship and others.

The above identified categories were next organised into themes. In this research, a theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned responses or meanings within the data set' (Browne & Clarke, 2006, p.82). Each individual theme was created by identifying related categories with a central organising concept. The creation of themes was driven by the research questions, therefore the identified themes captured the most important patterns in the data which addressed the brands' supportive roles in children's social and individual lives and the significance of the meaning of brands for their identity formation. Furthermore, the purposive and meaningful nature of children's relationships with brands was key for the theme identification.

The goal of developing these themes was to conceptually describe the phenomenon of children's relationship with brands and, at the same time, capture their lived experiences with their brands in order to gain an understanding of these meanings to them. An example of the process can be found in the Appendix 8. Furthermore, Table 3.8 below demonstrates the main themes, key words, examples of high order categories and supporting children's statements. Also, Appendix 9 reveals how many children mentioned each brand. Moreover, it has to be noted, that at this stage of the research, the coding and interpretation was shared/discussed with a qualitative research expert in order ensure that this research both reliable and trustworthy. More details of the reliability and validity of the research are provided in the following section 3.14.

Table 3.8 Themes, key words, examples of high order categories and supporting children's statements

Themes	Key words	Example of relevant high order categories	Supporting data – children's statements
Theme 1: Brand relationships in supporting children's self-esteem	self-construction and technological-brands	Self-construction and technological brands – enhancement of self-esteem	*"I would say I am an expert in gadgets because I can easily deal with them and I watch adverts and stuff ... I am always helping my Mum with her iPhone ... because she does not know very much about its functions and stuff" P1 (boy, aged 9)* *"I know how to use my iPhone very well ... I think better than my Mum and my Grandad ... specially Grandad ... I can say that I am an expert ... even some of my friends are asking me to help them to create videos of our dancing ... it makes me feel good ... like, you know, that I know more than them ..." P5 (girl, aged 9)*
		Brands as symbols of the technological era	*"... technologies are everything these days ... you can't really live without them and I think you don't need to go to school to learn ... they should close schools because we can learn everything from the internet" P17 (boy, aged 9):*
		Children's connectedness to the technological era in which they live	*"they are [technological brands] very important ... all people these days play or work with technologies, 'specially children. Like you know, children are crazy about technologies ... they are everywhere my X-box, iPad, Samsung, TV these are all technologies and they are very important" P1 (boy, aged 9):*
Theme 2: Brands for children's self-construction: self-image and self-presentation	Self-construction: fashion and cartoon brands; self-presentation	Children's desired self-images and brands with distinctive brand personalities	*": Because he is funny [Gru] ... when I watched the movie, he always makes children laugh ... I wanna be funny like Gru - so I will have more friends and more people will play with me" P3 (boy, aged 5).*
		Socially constructed symbols (popular brand) and self-presentation	*": Everyone will play with me ... because everyone will like my shoes [Nike Huaraches] ... I like playing with people and making lots of friends ...Huaraches will make me super popular" P26 (boy, aged 5):*

		Personal meanings and brands – self-achievement	*"Interviewer: Is that your Adidas bag?* *P1: Not yet … It will be soon … Mum said I can have it when my maths gets better* *Interviewer: How would you feel when your Mum lets you have it?* *P1: You know I am quite good at everything and I want be good at maths … I would feel good because I was working hard for it…" P1 (boy, aged 9),*
Theme 3: Symbolic brands as a tool for social categorisation	Apple brand, Concept of "Cool",	Self-judgment and categorisation of others	*"No, they're not cool … (laughing) … they just need to update themselves! If my friend has iPhone or iPad then we can do things together … like play and have fun … create and share videos … most of my friends are doing dancing like me so this is what we like doing most of the time …" P5 (girl, aged 9):*
		Apple brand –Cool brand	*"…it is just a cool brand … everybody knows that Apple is cool" P5 (girl, aged 9):*
Theme 4: Brands as supporters of socially constructed gender-identity	Gender-identity and gender-symbolic meanings of brands	Brands' support for children's social interactions with the opposite gender	*"P10: I wear it on special occasions … like when I'm out with my friends … and sometimes I wear them to school … all the girls do* *Interviewer: To school?* *P10: Yeah … sometimes* *Interviewer: So how do you feel – wearing perfume to school?* *P10: It makes me feel … different … you know, special … and I know boys like DKNY Apple – boys definitely love that" P10 (girl, aged 8):*
		Gender associations with brands	*"P6: I use my Dad's Lacoste* *Interviewer: So does it work?* *P6: Emm … I don't know…* *P7: Of course it does!* *P6: Yes, I think it does – it makes me feel good, like my Dad … he uses it every day* *Previously stated: "…some of them[girls] are aiming to impress the boys …* *Interviewer: And are boys are trying to impress them at the same time? So… it's like a game?* *P6 & P7: yeah…" P6 and P7 (boys, both aged 9):*
Theme 5: Brands as a supporters of children's' social status – liminal stage	Adulthood and childhood	Brands to transition into adulthood	*"Interviewer: How would it make you feel if your Mum did take you to Top-Shop?* *P8: Oh, my Mum would never do that – but if she would I wouldn't feel like a kid anymore" P8, (boy, aged 9)*

		Childhood/adulthood brand associations	*"Interviewer: Why Primark?* *P8: Because it has everything - every time my Mum goes to Primark, I know ... I feel like .... I see all these nice shirts ... and then she goes to the baby areas and picks me all baby t-shirts!!" P8, (boy, aged 9)*
Theme 6: Children's fantasy worlds and their brands	Superhero brands, self-construction, fantasy world	Self-construction and fantasy-based human traits	*P26: My Spiderman costume is my favourite at the moment ...* *Interviewer: Why is it your favourite?* *P26: Its red and looks like I have big muscles so I am very strong and I can climb buildings P26 (boy, aged 5):*
		Superhero brands and pretend play – opportunity to practice their strengths, competences and, consequently construct identity	*P9: I feel like I am a Super Man ... and I pretend that I am a Super Man and play like that ... I can be a Super Man all day long if I want to*
Theme 7 Brands and social embeddedness	Child-parent relationships, Brand embeddedness	Child as consumer-brand-parent relationships	*P13: My Mum went to the shop and bought it for me* *Interviewer: - So you didn't choose it with your Mum?* *P13: No – she just brought it home – I didn't like it but she made me wear it – but I started to like it during the wedding – and now I really love it – I look like a princess – it even has a crown P13 (girl, aged 5):*
Theme 8 Brands and social affiliation	Consumer belonging, school brands	To gain a sense of belonging to the school	*Interviewer: So what shoes do you wear to school?* *P22: ... I wear my Kickers ... always ... black ones* *Interviewer: - are they just for school?* *P22: Yeah ... they are* *Interviewer: are Kickers popular at school?* *P22: Well ... all my friends wear Kickers P22 (girl, aged 8):*
		Brands for school and school affiliation	*Interviewer: Is there any part of what you have to wear to school that you can choose yourself?* *P5: Yes – shoes* *Interviewer: - When you're buying shoes with your Mum, what are you looking for?* *P5: Shoes other people have* *Interviewer: You like to be like them – or you like to be different?* *P5: Like them ... but sometimes I like to be different – mainly like them P5 (girl, aged 9):*

Theme 9 Brands as buttressing children's life-projects	Life-projects, hobbies	Brands reflect children's selves and meaningful/relevant activities (hobbies)	*P10: I am a dancer – I love dancing* Interviewer: Do you have any special brands for your dancing? P10: Capezio … and Bloch – it's a German brand … they make dancing shoes P10 (girl, aged 8):
		Social importance of hobby-brands	*Interviewer: And do you wear your Pineapple t-shirt when you go shopping with your Mum?* *P5: Yes, sometimes … and sometimes when I am out with my friends* *Interviewer: Do any of your friends wear Pineapple t-shirts?* *P5: Yes … most of them … because we all do dancing* *P5 (girl, aged 9):*
Theme 10 Brands as leisure resources	Entertainment, fun and joy	Brands as major sources of entertainment	*… I always do something on my iPad because it is more fun … we (children) should have fun in our lives… P5 (girl, aged 9)* *I play with them (brands) all day … it would be no fun without these things in my home P4 (boy, aged 8)*
		Brands as prime sources of the emotional values of joy and happiness	*"For my birthday I got the latest X-box … I am planning to play every day … and I will never be bored … just happy" P8 (boy, aged 9) said:*

3.14 Reliability and validity

In consumer behaviour scholarship, the reliability and validity of research most frequently deploys the positivistic-informed Guba & Lincoln (1985) four-point evaluative model for helping to ascertain the trustworthiness of any kind of enquiry. Wallendorf & Belk (1989), it should be noted, have extended this model to make it applicable to ethnographic marketing research by including a fifth criterion referred to as "integrity". Holt (1991) critiques the contribution of Lincoln & Guba (1985) by adopting insights from interpretive anthropological methodologies. Whilst Holt (1991) views the Guba & Lincoln/ Wallendorf & Belk approaches critically, he acknowledges Hunt's (1989, p.187) opinion in that these approaches 'are both good procedure to adopt in actually conducting naturalistic inquiry and that these procedures can be used as evaluative criteria for assessing the justificatory warrant of the knowledge-claims generated by such research'.

Following Hunt's (1989) advice, the robustness/ trustworthiness of this research was achieved and evaluated through the following criteria: a) credibility; b) transferability; c) dependability; and d) confirmability as proposed by Guba & Lincoln (1985) and reaffirmed by Symon & Cassell (2012).

a) Credibility

This criterion refers to the whether or not the findings of the research truthfully reflect the children's views and opinions (feelings and emotions) towards the brands and their importance in their everyday lives. This research was specifically interested in hearing children's own voices therefore multiple in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted only with children. During these interviews children were able to speak openly in a conversational (friendly) manner. Furthermore, the adoption by the researcher of the least-adult approach helped to ensure that children were comfortable engaging in such dialogue. How the least-adult approach was deployed is explained in section 3.6 (The research process with children).

This research adopted the prolonged engagement technique in order to develop trusting relationships with the children and, consequently, gain accurate and rich insights into children's lived experiences with brands. Prolonged engagement is a technique used in order to help ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Thomas *et al*. (2015, p.384) clarify

that 'the researcher must spend enough time to obtain good data. The collection of qualitative data requires that the researcher spends sufficient time in a setting to develop an in-depth understanding and not reach superficial conclusions'.

In this research, sufficient time was spent with each child to develop a trusting relationship, blend in with the child's world and help ensure that the children were disclosing information that accurately reflected their views. Furthermore, Braun & Clarke's (2013, p.287) proposed criteria to ensure that robust coding of thematic analysis was achieved because equal attention was afforded to each transcript, the coding process was inclusive and did not rely on a small number of vivid examples, and that the themes were consistent, distinctive and coherent.

b) Transferability/generalisability

Mason (2002, p.39) states that:

> '… generalisability involves the extent to which you can make some form of wider claim on the basis of your research and analysis, rather than simply stating that your analysis is entirely idiosyncratic and particular'.

The aim of this research is to understand and explore the nature of these relationships and the role of brands in children's individual and social lives. In this research, what can be considered as generalisable is the fact that the findings identify that children do have meaningful and purposive relationships with their brands which provide them with a range of benefits (functional and emotional) which help them to position themselves in this world. Moreover, it is clear that children's relationships with brands are sustained through the symbolic meanings of their brands which they create and recognise through their lived experiences with them. Having explained that, this research provided "thick descriptions" which support the generalisability/transferability of the study. These descriptions reflect the importance of brands in children's lives where the research captured sufficient details of their lived experiences with brands to make meaningful conclusions.

c) Dependability

In general, Moisander & Valtonen (2006) propose that in, order to provide reliability the research process should be (a) transparent and it should pay attention to (b) theoretical transparency. These points have been addressed earlier in this chapter. The research

design is carefully explained and the researcher's position and the position of the children in this research well clarified.

The research here was qualitative in nature and subscribed to the view of Conrad & Serlin, (2005, p. 416) who bring to attention that 'there is not an unchanging universe where pure replication is possible and desirable'. Whilst elements of this research can be considered transferable and generalisable, no claims are made that it can be considered repeatable because of the ever-changing nature of relationships that people, in this case children, have with their brands, as brought to our attention by Fournier (1998; 2009) and others. The aim of this research, it should be noted, was to explore the role of children's relationships with brands in the here and now and it is fully accepted that both brands, and the role of these brands, will almost certainly change over time and be different in a different sample.

Guba & Lincoln (1985) propose that reliability in quantitative research is equivalent to dependability in qualitative research. In relation to the reliability/ dependability of a research project, Mason (2002, p.187) proposes that the following question needs to be addressed and that is: 'how can I [researcher] demonstrate that my methods are reliable and accurate?' This research can be deemed reliable (and thus dependable) by providing a very detailed methodological description and justification which fits well with its declared and explained philosophical position and aims. Full details are provided in section 3.6.

Furthermore, Kvale & Brinkman (2009) caution that the first potential factor pertaining to the reliability of interviewing children is that 'the child appears to be influenced by interviewer's suggestions and leading questions … and may provide unreliable or directly false information' (p.146). This risk factor has been reduced in this research through the careful development of age-appropriate guiding questions. Interview questions were simply phrased, short, and phrased such that children did not perceive them in such a way that they felt inclined to provide researcher's desired answer. During the interviews, children were carefully listened to and efforts were made to avoid them being distracted in order to provide them with the opportunity to fully express their own thoughts, feelings and opinions in relation to their own lives and the importance of brands for them.

d) Confirmability

Lincoln & Guba (1985, p.290) define confirmability as 'the degree to which findings are determined by the respondents and not by the biases, motivations, interests or perspectives of the inquirer'. Sections 3.12 and 3.13 of this research clearly explain how the data was collected, who it was obtained from, and how it was analysed and this subscribes to the view of Symon & Cassell (2012). Given that all recorded interviews, written notes and transcripts were/are confidential and many children lacked the ability to read transcripts or passages of analysis for checking purposes, as recommended by Braun & Clark (2013), reliability of what was said by the respondents in relation to important topics was checked by asking children to re-affirm what they said, repeat how they felt and what they experienced in relation to their brands in later interviews. It should be noted that whilst a central aim of this research project was to hear the views and opinions from the respondents in their own words, these were analysed and interpreted from an academic marketer's perspective.

The research here, from the outset, aimed to gain an acceptable level of objectivity and limit bias caused by the adult-view of children. Having recognised this, much time was spent in the field of study (in the children's homes or the homes of their friends) and the researcher experienced the lived worlds of the informants by virtue of the fact that more than one informal and formal meeting took place during the data collection process. Every effort was made throughout to gain familiarity with children's language, quote it directly in the Findings Chapter (4) and interpret the children's words accurately and truthfully. Thomas *et al*. (2015, p.385) opine that the clarification of research bias and 'evidence that the researchers acknowledge their biases and deal with them is essential'. These authors argue that this is one of the techniques to increase trustworthiness of qualitative research and this is the case in this research as evidenced in this section.

Notably, the fact that the researcher is not a parent is viewed positively in this context because parental bias does not exist. However, it is acknowledged that this also might be a limitation at the stage of interpretation of the data as well as at the data collection stage because, it is assumed that, in this situation, when a researcher has some experience with children as a parent, he/she might obtain more objective and knowledgeable views on children and on the data which has been collected.

Finally, this research is in alignment with that of Hajli *et al.* (2015), Nwanko *et al.* (2011) and Ojo *et al.* (2013) in that it has described the coding and analysis processes in a detail (sections above: 3.13). Furthermore, the process of coding and interpretation was shared with another scholar in order to ensure that the results of this research are both valid and trustworthy. Also, inline with the above authors, in this research, the coding, analysis and theme formation processes have been shared with the supervisory-team of this project and also with a qualitative research expert holding an advisory role in this project (who was not a member of supervisory-team). The expert has concurred with the codes, appropriate meanings and themes. Consequently, very few disagreements between the author of the current project and the expert occurred. Hence, the role of expert as advisor helped to 'guide and mediate the researcher's assumptions' and also helped to ensure 'that authorial voice did not drone the voices of the respondents' (Ojo *et al.*, 2013, p.292). Therefore, the validity of this research, its trustworthiness and interpretation were assured.

3.14.a Critical reflectivity

Thorpe & Holt (2007, p.183-184) argue that 'reflexivity entails the researcher being aware of his effect on the process and outcomes' and 'in carrying out qualitative research, it is impossible to remain 'outside' our subject matter; our presence, in whatever form, will have some kind of effect.' In this research, Section 3.6 provides a detailed discussion of how the participants (children) were viewed in this thesis. In keeping with the principles of New Sociology, children were afforded an autonomic position and only they took part in this research project. "Power over children" is discussed as this was identified as an important consideration to help reduce the possibility of the researcher influencing the children's responses. The main potential issue was identified as a result of the fact that children are unaccustomed to being treated as equals by adults (Punch, 2002). Consequently, a child might provide information in order to please the interviewer rather than express their own thoughts and beliefs (Morrow & Richards, 1996). In order to reduce this potential issue, the role of least-adult was adopted in this research and is fully discussed in section 3.6. Consequently, all interviews were conducted in a friendly conversational manner and friendly relationships were developed with the children and their parents/caregivers. During the interviews it was evident that the children enjoyed the process and felt valued (they enjoyed being listened to). All agreed that, should another chance arise,

they would be eager to participate again. This indicates that the concern relating to power distance was reduced the and the issue relating to the researcher influencing responses was largely overcome. Furthermore, section 3.14 (Reliability and validity) addresses the concerns raised here.

Summary

This research was exploratory in its nature and aimed to investigate children's relationships with brands. The philosophical position was interpretivistic and that provided clear epistemological and ontological positions to this research which are well articulated in this chapter. The focus of this research was to explore children's relationships with brands in which they are considered as active consumers with their own voices. Since this research involved children who are considered a vulnerable group, much consideration was given to ethical issues and gaining the necessary ethical approval from the UEL Ethical Committee (see Appendix 1). Furthermore, based on the epistemological and ontological positions of this research and its CCT driven theoretical underpinnings, this research adopted a qualitative methodology comprising in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Also, these interviews had elements of phenomenology which were needed in order to capture children's lived experiences with brands. Thirty-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews took place involving children of both genders between the ages of 5 – 9. All thirty-one interviews were carefully transcribed and an appropriate coding process was applied. This research adopted thematic analysis and IPA to interpret the data. Such analysis enabled the development of ten conceptual themes which provide valuable insights into the roles that brands play in children's lives. These are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 - Research Findings

This chapter will describe ten dominant themes which have been identified and developed from the interviews with children. These themes explain and describe the complex nature of children's brand relationships and the importance of brands in children's social and personal lives. More specifically, these themes explore the symbolic meanings, both individual and shared, which children attach to brands and how/why children use them in order to achieve their self-goals and support their identity projects.

The first theme describes the role of brands for children's self-esteem enhancement where the technological brands and children lives within the technological era are explored. The second theme explains the role of brands for children's self-presentation where children's brand relationships are identified as important and supportive for children's self-image formations and their desired self. Further, the children's relationships with the popular brands are explored and their supportive role for children's desired selves is explained, where the brands, as symbols of social acceptance, are discovered. The third theme is devoted to brands used by children as tools in order to socially categorise themselves and others. The fourth theme explains children's gender identities and supportive and the meaningful role of their relationships with brands where the role of parents, as a source of gender information, is identified. The next theme is devoted to the children's liminal stage and the symbolic role of brands which helps them to position themselves in society. Theme number six explains the phenomena of fantasy worlds and the symbolic role of superhero brands for its construction. The next theme explains the sophisticated nature of children's brand connections which are affected by children's social relationships with their parents. Theme eight explains the school social context and how children's community feelings are supported through their relationships with brands. Then, children's life-projects and the supportive role of brands is explained in the context of their hobbies. The last theme is devoted to the benefits which children derive from their relationships with brands, where both emotional and functional aspects of the brand relationships are explained.

4.1 Brand relationships in supporting children's self-esteem

This research identified an interesting and significant connection between brands and children's positive perceptions of themselves. In other words, the category of self-esteem and the symbolic meaning of brands clearly emerged from the interviews with children. Self-esteem is an important element for individual self-construction and self-enhancement. Significantly, it was identified that children's self-esteem enhancement is connected to the idea of the technological progress in the world and supported by the technological brands which they use in their everyday lives.

It was clear in all the interviews that children had a strong awareness of the technological progress in the world. For example:

P14 (boy aged 8) said:

> *... technologies are everything these days ... you can't really live without them and I think you don't need to go to school to learn ... they should close schools because we can learn everything from the internet*

P27 (girl aged 9) said:

> *... my phone and my iPad are the most important things in my room ... I use them all the time – playing games, chatting to my friends – all my friends do this all the time ... we can't live without them*

Furthermore, there was strong evidence that engaging with brands which they associate with this ever-developing world plays an extremely important role in their everyday lives. The conversations with children revealed a high level of brand awareness of many technological brands such as *X-box*, *Sony Play Station*, *Apple (iPhone and iPads)*, *Samsung*. Almost every child spoke enthusiastically about a variety of technological brands and stated that of all the brands in their lives, these were the most important. During the interviews, it was clear that children engage with a variety of different technological brands and receiving the information about them from different sources is important. Significantly, the notion that children live in the technological era and that they are well-aware of this themselves, should not be overlooked. Interestingly, the interviews revealed that children perceive certain technological brands as representors/symbols of this era.

P17 (boy, aged 9):

>Interviewer: *So, what do you think about technologies?*
>
>P17: *Technologies are everything these days and you should know how to use them but it's easy you know … well Apple, X-box…. actually, Samsung Galaxy … yes - I know them all and I can use them all easily …*

P1 (boy, aged 9):

>Interviewer: *Can you tell me more about these technologies in your life?*
>
>P1: *they are very important … all people these days play or work with technologies, 'specially children. Like you know, children are crazy about technologies … they are everywhere my X-box, iPad, Samsung, TV these are all technologies and they are very important*

The enhancement of their self-esteem through the use and engagement with technological brands cannot be separated from the notion of the digital age. Deeper analysis revealed the category of self-esteem as being highly significant. It was evident that children were very confident in using these technological brands and frequently defined themselves as experts:

P1 (boy, aged 9) said:

>*I would say I am an expert in gadgets because I can easily deal with them and I watch adverts and stuff … I am always helping my Mum with her iPhone … because she does not know very much about its functions and stuff*

P5 (girl, aged 9) said:

>*I know how to use my iPhone very well … I think better than my Mum and my Grandad … specially Grandad … I can say that I am an expert … even some of my friends are asking me to help them to create videos of our dancing … it makes me feel good … like, you know, that I know more than them …*

P8 (boy, aged 9) said:

>Interviewer: *I have never played with an X-box and have no idea how to use it!*
>
>P8: *Really? Everyone should know it today … I am an expert with the X-box because I am playing with it all the time … you should know how to use technologies these days*

Therefore, the interviewed children had a very clear understanding of the technological era in which they live. The examples above support the idea that children have meaningful connections with these technological brands and that they play an important role in the enhancement of their self-esteem.

Consequently, for children these brands are strong representors of the technological era and they clearly stated the importance of them in their lives. These brands provide children with positive feelings and beliefs of their high competency levels and skilfulness in using them. Interestingly, the analysis of the data in this research reveals that, for some of the children interviewed, the actual possession of the brands is not always essential in order for it to contribute to their self-esteem enhancement, but demonstrating the ability to use them was. For example, the interviews with P4 (boy, aged 8) and P2 (girl, aged 8) who did not own such technological devices, were recorded on an Apple iPad and they frequently pointed out ways to make the process more efficient saying *"let me show you ..."*, *"what if we do this ..."* and *"did you know about this ...?"*

P4 (boy, aged 8):

> Interviewer: *You're very good with iPads!*
>
> P4: (very proudly) - *Yes, I'm an expert in iPads and all the other gadgets – it's very easy for me!*

Consequently, children not only have great level of the awareness of the technological brands, but also perceive these brands as symbols of the technological era in which they live. Further, the possession of the technological brands and/or abilities to use them helps children to feel competent, knowledgeable and connected to the technological era in which they live. It is significant that children's self-esteem is enhanced in the social context of the digital age where children share symbolic meanings which they attach to certain brands. Consequently, the role that relationships children have with these brands serves to enhance their self-esteem.

4.2 Brands for children's self-image and self-presentation construction

CCT strongly emphasises the meaningful connection between self-concept and consumer relationships with brands. The interviews with children have identified an

interesting point in relation to both individual and shared symbolic meanings of brands and the concepts of self-image and self-presentation which both are factors of self-concept. Analysis of the data revealed that brands and their symbolic meanings help children to develop their desired self-images which then they are willing to use in their self-presentation. Therefore, this research revealed that relationships with these brands support children's social selves in their everyday lives.

Interestingly and not surprisingly, children quite often referred to branded cartoon characters and named *Gru*, *Frozen*, *Superman*, *Batman* and others. This highlights that children have brand consciousness. All of these characters are seen as brands in this research, each with distinctive brand personalities which have been created and attributed to them by their originators and enhanced by marketers. Clearly, children engage with these brands through media, interaction with computer games and/or using products of brands extensions. Moreover, children have personal associations with some of these brands and adopt certain characteristics which they perceive as being relevant and valuable for their own unique self-personal goals.

The following key points have been identified in relation to the child-brand-self connection. Firstly, it was clear that children are able recognise not only brand names, but also the brand's personality characteristics and they had clear associations with these brands. Secondly, it has been revealed that children have a clear understanding of how they would like others to see them, where each child has his/her own individual and unique motivations. Thirdly, children expressed enthusiasm to incorporate brand-personality traits which they recognised to their own selves in order to achieve their desired selves (self-personal goals). Therefore, it can be argued that there is a connection between a brand and a child which serves the purpose of self-image creation and consequently, self-presentation. For example, P3 (boy, aged 5), referred to *Gru*, a cartoon character, during the discussion on computer games. P3 recognised the human characteristics of this brand and he also recognised the emotional reaction of other children towards the brand/brand-character. Furthermore, P3 highly emphasised that, for him, it is important to be funny, because, he believed, when you are funny people like you. P3 has a positive brand perception and has associations of friendship and fun which have been initially encoded to the brand image of *Gru*. Consequently, the brand *Gru* is seen by the child as a symbol of positive social interaction. Here the child wishes to incorporate the perceived characteristics of the brand into his self in order to develop

his social relationships. The child in this case is seeking to create a particular self-image through the brand and then present this image through interaction with others in order to satisfy his individual personal goals and support his desired self:

P3 (boy, aged 5):

> Interviewer: *So what sort of games do you play on your computer?*
>
> P3: *Despicable me!*
>
> Interviewer: *Oh very nice … and do you like the cartoon also?*
>
> P3: *Yes…*
>
> Interviewer: *And who is your favourite character from the cartoon?*
>
> P3: *Gru*
>
> Interviewer – *Why is he your favourite?*
>
> P3: *Because he is funny … when I watched the movie, he always makes children laugh … I wanna be funny like Gru - so I will have more friends and more people will play with me*

It is important to clarify here that children use cartoon brands as sources of meaningful personal traits and associations which they are able to adopt and match to their identities. Consequently, children have relationships with these brands which are both meaningful and purposive. These relationships are complex and subjective in nature because each child has unique personal self-desires. Here brands help children to create their desired self-images and consequently, desired-selves. Therefore, it can be assumed that the connection between a brand and a child here is based on: the (1) child's brand associations, (2) child's individual self-concept understanding and representation and (3) congruency between a child's self and how they perceive the brand personality. Therefore, these brands are linked to the children's selves because they are able to help children to achieve their self-personal goals.

4.2.1 Popular brands and children's self-presentation

Whereas the branded cartoon characters have very distinctive brand personalities which symbolise social acceptance for children and provide support to their desired selves, there are other brands which contribute to the children's self-presentation. This research revealed that children recognise the socially constructed symbols which are attached to certain brands and then use them for their own self-construction and presentation if the

meanings of these symbols are relevant for their own self goals. More specifically, the category of brands that are perceived by children as making them popular (popularity brands) have been explored in order to understand the connection children have with these brands and how they use them in the context of the creation of their desired self. It was revealed that children use brands in order to categorise themselves in their social world and, at the same time, get closer to their desired self. In the interviews, it was clear that gaining popularity was an important desire of children and brands served an important role in them achieving that objective. For example, P26 (boy, aged 5) could recall a brand name (*Huaraches*) and, moreover, have a conversation in which he was able to articulate and understand the importance of how possessing such a brand would contribute positively to his life. Interestingly, the child did not have an actual lived experience with that brand but had brand knowledge and well recognised the symbolic meaning of popularity. The conversation about owning the brand clearly revealed that, by doing so, he would emotionally benefit by gaining in popularity and, consequently, widen his circle of friends. He has clearly attached symbolic meanings to the *Huarache* brand which, to him, would provide popularity and acceptance by peers:

P26 (boy, aged 5):

> P26: *I want golden ones….*
>
> Interviewer: *The golden ones?*
>
> P26: *Yes!*
>
> Interviewer: *Imagine if tomorrow morning you could go to school in your new gold Huarache trainers - how would you feel?*
>
> P26: *Happy! (loudly)*
>
> Interviewer: *And?*
>
> P26: *Excited! (loudly)*
>
> Interviewer: *And why would you be excited?*
>
> P26: *Because I like Huaraches …*
>
> Interviewer: *And what do you think other children will say to you if they would see in your new Huaraches?*
>
> P26: *Everyone will play with me … because everyone will like my shoes*
>
> Interviewer: *And would you play with them?*
>
> P26: *Yes … I like playing with people and making lots of friends …Huaraches will make me super popular*

Significantly, the social context and each child's individual self-goals need to be considered together in order to better understand the symbolic meanings of brands and the role that they play in children's lives. Whereas P26 used the *Huaraches* brand as a symbol of widening his circle of friends and thus contributing to the construction of his desired self, other children use different brands for their individual self-construction purposes. For example P1 (boy, aged 9), a boy who demonstrated a high level of ambition, perceived a blue Adidas bag as a symbol of his self-achievement:

Interviewer: *Is that your Adidas bag?*

P1: *Not yet ... It will be soon ... Mum said I can have it when my maths gets better*

Interviewer: *How would you feel when your Mum lets you have it?*

P1: *You know I am quite good at everything and I want be good at maths ... I would feel good because I was working hard for it...*

Interviewer: *Would any new bag motivate you to work harder at maths?*

P1: *No way! It has to be a blue Adidas bag!*

The example above demonstrates that children have meaningful relationships with brands which are based on their individual self-concepts.

4.3 Symbolic brands as tools for social categorisation

The interviews also revealed that brands and their symbolic meanings are not only supporting children in development of their own particular self-image and self-presentation, but are also used by children as tools to socially categorise others. The categories of "cool" and "not cool" featured strongly but not surprisingly in the analysis of data. In other words, a child uses brands as tools to judge other people, identify status and/or to identify whether or not there is a likeness between him/her and other individuals. For example, P5 (girl aged 9), demonstrated a clear brand consciousness of the *Apple* brand and had a strong connection with it. It was evident that children use some brands as stereotypes, or as a symbol of catergorisation, here cool/ not cool, in order to differentiate one individual from another and to support her feelings of belonging to a particular social category.

P5 (girl, aged 9):

>P5: *... I think when people see that I am using my iPhone they think that I am cool ... maybe they also think that I am showing off but it is just a cool brand ... everybody knows that Apple is cool*
>
>Interviewer: *OK – do your friends have iPhones?*
>
>P5: *Yes, some of them*
>
>Interviewer: *So your friends who don't have iPhones are NOT cool?*
>
>P5: *No, they're not cool ... (laughing) ... they just need to update themselves! If my friend has iPhone or iPad then we can do things together ... like play and have fun ... create and share videos ... most of my friends are doing dancing like me so this is what we like doing most of the time ...*

A cool brand, it might be argued, is a socially constructed, very dynamic and a complex phenomenon. Children, it is revealed, are part of the consumer world and they are able to use brands and their symbolic meanings for their own unique purposes. Therefore, children's relationships with brands are purposive and help children to position themselves and others through categories that are meaningful to them in their world.

Brands clearly hold strong individual and shared symbolic meanings for children and contribute to the various aspects of their self-concept. Consequently, brands, as sources of symbolic meanings are playing very meaningful roles in lives of children: they help children to develop their desired selves, for example, gaining in popularity, acting as symbols of achievement and providing a means by which they establish and identify meaningful social categories.

4.4 Brands as supporters of socially constructed gender identity

Consumer culture, brands with their symbolic meanings and stereotypes are sources of social knowledge. This research revealed that children perceived some brands as being for adults only where the symbolic meanings of these brands are, at times, deeply gendered to them. Interestingly, children admitted that they are using these brands for their own unique social purposes, meaning children have interpersonal attraction motives. Also, the role of parents as a source of gender information is evident. Brands are integrated into the daily lives of children and their parents, where children are able

to observe their parents using certain brands. Furthermore, children associate brands which are used by their parents with their associated gender. Children, therefore, perceive some brands as symbols of masculinity and femininity. Consequently, children tend to use brands in social situations where they willing to highlight their gender and create particular representations of themselves in order to achieve social goals.

Interestingly, for children, in order succeed and feel comfortable in the particular social situation, the actual visual representation of a brand was sometimes not important. The symbolic meaning of a particular gender of a particular brand, and actual use of this brand, were key for the child's comfort in the interactive social processes and his/her self-confidence. For example, P6 (boy, aged 9) strongly believed that *Lacoste* was an adult brand and not for children. The brand, and the actual use of this brand, was important for the participant for his social interaction with the opposite gender. The school environment, in which children are required to wear uniforms, provides both opportunities and challenges in terms of children expressing their individuality through brands. The following conversation supports the main ideas of this theme:

P6 and P7 (boys, both aged 9):

> P7: *Yes… but these days … some of them are aiming to impress the boys …*
> Interviewer: *And are boys are trying to impress them at the same time? So… it's like a game?*
> P6 & P7: *yeah…*
> Interviewer: *And on these special days what do girls wear to impress the boys?*
> P7: *Sometimes they've like been hair spraying themselves and stuff, perfume so they can smell nice and look nice*
> Interviewer: *Really?*
> P7: *And then to boys - using after shave and gel*
> Interviewer: *Really? Wow - and do you do this also?*
> P6: *Yeah ... I used to put gel and aftershave on my hair but not today … my hair is too long and I can't gel it*
> Interviewer: *So which aftershave?*
> P6: *I use my Dad's Lacoste*
> Interviewer: *So does it work?*
> P6: *Emm … I don't know...*
> P7: *Of course it does!*

P6: *Yes, I think it does – it makes me feel good, like my Dad … he uses it every day*

Furthermore, the research also revealed that girls have high levels of brand awareness for this high-involvement product category. For example, P10 (girl, aged 8) very passionately refers to perfume brands which are very important in her life and she believes the use of these brands makes her attractive to boys and make her feel special:

P10 (girl, aged 8):

Interviewer: *What special things do you have in your bedroom?*

P10: *…. a CD player – because we have everything else downstairs … my shoe rack, three wardrobes, shelves … all my perfume …*

Interviewer: *Are you into perfume – what is your favourite?*

P10: *I really like … you know Lady Million – Paco Rabane … I also like Red Jeans … and I like DKNY Apple … my Mum uses Paco Rabane – I used to use hers but now I have my own*

Interviewer: *So where do you wear this perfume?*

P10: *I wear it on special occasions … like when I'm out with my friends … and sometimes I wear them to school … all the girls do*

Interviewer: *To school?*

P10: *Yeah … sometimes*

Interviewer: *So how do you feel – wearing perfume to school?*

P10: *It makes me feel … different … you know, special … and I know boys like DKNY Apple – boys definitely love that*

Therefore, this research revealed that brands and their gendered symbolic meanings are sources of social knowledge. They provide children with the support which they need for their social interactions with the opposite gender, where their gender identification and its reinforcement is very important to them. It is evident that children, through the gendered symbolic meanings they attach to brands, and further using these brands in their daily lives, are attempting to express their individuality. Consequently, these brands are highly meaningful in children's lives and the relationships with them are purposive in nature.

4.5 Brands as a supporters of children social status – liminal stage

This research revealed the characteristics of the liminal/pre-liminal stages of children's social status and the system of symbolic meanings of brands which are connected to these stages. Additionally, the research revealed that children create such systems in order to accomplish their transition from childhood to adulthood. It is also worth considering that categories of parenting processes, lived experience, consumption experience and the complex nature of brands in children's consumer culture should be reflected for better understanding of the child's transition period. Furthermore, the significant role of brands and their symbolic meaning for children's social identity formation has been revealed here.

Most of the interviewed children perceived themselves as being in a transitional period. More specifically, it was clear from the interviews that the children do understand their position in society and that they are aware that childhood is a temporary period for them and that the older they get, the closer to adulthood they become. Therefore, the interviewed children actively analyse their transitional period in order to better understand which social category they belong to. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that children use brands, particularly clothing brands, and product/brand characteristics to support their transition into adulthood and complete their social identities.

It is clear from the interviews that children associate and symbolise certain brands with adulthood and childhood. For children who have, themselves, identified that they are in a transitional period, these brands are valuable. Interestingly, the product/brand characteristic of size is used by children to emphasise that they are not children any longer. For example, P1 (boy, aged 9) and P29 (girl, aged 9) both stressed this in the interviews:

P1 (boy, aged 9):

> P1: *I want the black one ...yeah... but they cost fortunes ... a pair of Jordances my size cost £40 ...*
>
> Interviewer: *It's quite expensive*
>
> P1: *I am size 3 <u>adult</u> size actually ....*

P29 (girl, aged 9):

> P29: *I have got my new Adidas trainers just yesterday and I really love them!!*
>
> Interviewer: *Oh, they look fantastic ... I would like pair of those myself!*
>
> P29: *They probably would fit you as they are adult size - size 5*
>
> Interviewer: *Oh yes ... they might*
>
> P29: *... But they are expensive - I am adult size now*

Analysis of the interviews shows that children clearly understand their position in society and the facilitating position of their parents/care givers. This research revealed that, in some cases, children attach the symbolic meanings of childhood to brands through the consumption practices of their parents where children had a passive role. In other words, parents purchase products for their children without children being involved in the process and children accept the parents' choice since they acknowledge their parents' facilitating position. Consequently, brands which have been purchased by parents for children are associated by children with childhood. However, since they are in their transitional stage they demonstrated their willingness to switch from brands which they associate with childhood to the brands which would support their new social identity where they are not children any longer. It is also worth considering that the idea that possessions are important for the establishment of an individual's identity is well developed by scholars and further analysis revealed a supportive role of brands which they perceive as brands for adults and not for children. For example, P8 (boy, aged 9), clearly differentiates *Primark* from *Topshop* based on his own individual symbolic understanding of these brands. Additionally, he clearly communicates that he is in the transitional stage through his brand preferences:

P8, (boy, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *Which store would you go to if you could choose?*
>
> P8: *Errr ... what is it called ... Primark ...*
>
> Interviewer: *Why Primark?*
>
> P8: *Because it has everything - every time my Mum goes to Primark, I know ... I feel like .... I see all these nice shirts ... and then she goes to the baby areas and picks me all baby t-shirts!!*
>
> Interviewer: *So, you don't like these t-shirts?*
>
> P8: *No – not the baby ones – I like the better ones (laughing)*
>
> Interviewer: *- What do you mean "better" ones?*

P8: *Not baby ones – grown-up ones – I wish I could take my Mum to Top-Shop to buy my clothes ...*

Interviewer: *How would it make you feel if your Mum did take you to Top-Shop?*

P8: *Oh, my Mum would never do that – but if she would I wouldn't feel like a kid anymore*

The quotes above are good examples of how children are willing to use some brands and product characteristics as symbols of their transition into adulthood, whilst, at the time, still accepting their status of children.

The research revealed that brands are clearly contributing to children's social identities and help them to sustain their position in society. Therefore, a child connection with a brand, and it symbolic meaning of adulthood, is purposive in their lives. Significantly, the brand's symbolic meaning of adulthood is attached and formed by children themselves through the parenting processes, consumption practices and lived experiences.

4.6 Children's fantasy worlds and their brands

Superheroes and stories about them are part of consumer culture. Children engage with images and different brand characters through the interaction with TV programmes, movies, computer games, as well as different products categories. More specifically, this section of the research findings is devoted to the superhero brands which are part of the popular media stories and consumer culture, children's imagination and fantasies. The research revealed that these brands help children to create their imagined world (fantasy) where they are able to obtain different fictional personal characteristics such as super powers and, consequently expand their self-identity. Additionally, it was revealed that children are able to experience unreality/fantasy within the real world where these brands are playing significantly supportive roles.

Unrealities/fantasy worlds are constructed through imagination and fantasy where both of these concepts are supported by superhero brands and their distinctive stories and identities. Children's imaginations and fantasies formed by both stories behind each brand and products which holds particular brand associations. Therefore, engagement

with an object (a product with a distinctive superhero association) is forming (boosting) imagination and shapes fantasy.

P9, (boy, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *So, you said you like watching TV, what is favourite program?*
>
> P9*: I like Superman and Spiderman things, I also have lots of toys, like Hulk gloves and other stuff*
>
> Interviewer: *And you said that your favourite t-shirt is the one with the Superman, right?*
>
> P9: *Yeah….*
>
> Interviewer: *And how do you feel when you are wearing it?*
>
> P9: *I feel like I am a Superman … and I pretend that I am a Superman and play like that … I can be a Superman all day long if I want to*

P26 (boy, aged 5):

> Interviewer: *Tell me about your favourite things?*
>
> P26: *My Spiderman costume is my favourite at the moment …*
>
> Interviewer: *Why is it your favourite?*
>
> P26: *Its red and looks like I have big muscles so I am very strong and I can climb buildings*
>
> Interviewer: *Really? Can you only climb buildings when you wearing your Spiderman costume?*
>
> P26: *Yes – of course!*

P17, (boy, aged 9)

> P17: *… I have a Superman t-shirt and it's my favourite*
>
> Interviewer: *Why do you like it so much?*
>
> P17: *Because when I am wearing it … I am Superman!!!*
>
> Interviewer: *(laughing) So can you fly like Superman?*
>
> P17: *Yes, of course!!! (laughing)*

A very multifarious nature of brand phenomenon and consumer culture, where different stories are part of each superhero brand is evident in the quotes above. Furthermore, each superhero brand has a very distinctive brand identity and personality which triggers children's imaginations and fantasies. Furthermore, children actively

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incorporate the fictional characteristics of the brand characters into their self-identities. Still, the element of fantasy should not be ignored in this case. The creation of the unreality/fantasy world would not be possible without the concept of fantasy. Fantasies allowed children to create a subjective world where a child is able to go beyond what is believed and known in reality. The children interviewed had a strong belief that fictional brands provide them personally with real power and a real ability to fly, climb buildings or run faster, thus demonstrating that they perceive a fantasy world as a being part of their real world.

P14 (boy, aged 8):

> P14: *Yes ... Superman and all that ....*
>
> Interviewer: *And do you have Superman on one of your t-shirts?*
>
> P14: *No, I like Hulk*
>
> Interviewer: *Hulk… tell me about him?*
>
> P14: *He is strong and big and he can't die and he can transform to a normal person*
>
> Interviewer: *And how often do you wear a t-shirt with his picture?*
>
> P14: *Nearly every day…*
>
> Interviewer: *Every day… does it make you feel special?*
>
> P14: *I feel like Hulk… I feel like I can do anything, he can do … really…*

The interview quotes above, in this section, are examples of children's abilities and willingness to incorporate the extraordinary fantasy characteristics like flying and climbing of superheroes into their own identities/ imagined abilities thus providing a positive lived-experience with these brands in their real lives. Therefore, the self-expansion concept is evidenced: children are motivated to obtain and incorporate characteristics of these brand identities in order to improve their existing skills, or to gain imaginary skills. Moreover, these brands are enabling children to connect the fantasy world of their choice with their real worlds. Superhero brands, therefore, are important for children's lives and self-construction. Children connect with these brands at an imaginative level where imagination is part of the fantasy which helps them to express their desired identities and create "fantasy" worlds.

4.7 Brands and social embeddedness

Children's social relationships have emerged during the analysis process as one of the important categories needed in order to understand the nature of the child brand connection. Child consumer socialisation is influenced by the social relationships children have with their parents. Regularly, children consume products/brands which are purchased by their parents and/or familiarise themselves with brands through the parents/caregivers positive experiences.

This research revealed that the social relationships a child has with his/her parents/caregivers might affect the relationships/connection a child has with a specific brand. It is worth considering that children recognise parents' power and acknowledge their financial importance. The nature of the relationships a child has with his/her parent/ caregiver may affect a child's brand preference and, further, the bond between a child and a brand. Furthermore, it was revealed that brands/objects are embedded in the relationships children have with their parents/caregivers. This phenomenon was evidenced in the interviews with children. More specifically, children described different aspects of their lives as consumers and highlighted the important role of their parents and, further, their attitudes towards consumption choices which their parents made for them. Children frequently accepted advice from their parents resulting in a child consumer-brand-parent relationship scenario. Some younger children interviewed readily admitted that they did not accompany their parents on shopping trips and they happily accepted what was purchased for them. For example, P13 responded:

P13 (girl, aged 5):
> Interviewer: *Which is your favourite dress?*
> P13: *My wedding dress*
> Interviewer: *Where did you get it from – did you choose it?*
> P13: *My Mum went to the shop and bought it for me*
> Interviewer: - *So you didn't choose it with your Mum?*
> P13: *No – she just brought it home – I didn't like it but she made me wear it – but I started to like it during the wedding – and now I really love it – I look like a princess – it even has a crown*
> Interviewer: - *Tell me more about your wedding dress – where did your Mum get it from?*

P13: *Sainsbury's – you can buy anything there …*

P17 (boy, aged 9):

Interviewer: *What are you favourite clothes?*

P17: *My real favourite is my Tesco's jeans – I wear them all the time*

Interviewer: *Did you choose them yourself?*

P17: *No, my Dad did … black ones …Tesco's makes the best jeans – my Dad says so and I feel great when I'm wearing them*

Children are frequently able to recall brand names and this is well evidenced in this section. Furthermore, it was revealed that brands are embedded into the children's interpersonal relationships and this should not be dismissed as unimportant in the child's life. For example, in the case of P13 (girl, aged 5), the *Sainsbury's* brand is recalled and embedded in the social relationship the child has with her mother. Likewise, in the case of P17 (boy, aged 9), the bond the child has with the *Tescos* brand is influenced by the relationship he has with his father. Therefore, it can be argued that a child's brand preference and awareness might be affected by the child's social relationships. Interestingly, further interaction with the object/brands contributed to the formation of the positive behaviour towards the brand which then brought positive emotions to the child. Therefore, the child-brand connection could be characterised as an emotionally rewarding and occasional.

Furthermore, analysis disclosed another an interesting aspect of the parent-brand-child relationships. More specifically, that a child might have a connection with the brand because he/she is gaining familiarity and have particular brand associations based on the parents/caregivers and their lived experiences with the brand. For example, P8 has a brand awareness and preference for the *Nike* brand over *Adidas* and admits to a strong connection with the brand:

P8 (boy, aged 9):

Interviewer: *So why do you prefer Nike to Adidas?*

P8: *Because … Nike … my Dad … he used to be a football player in Africa and he used to wear Nike shoes and I just … when I was younger … I saw him wearing Nike and I decided… so I just getting more connected to Nike than Adidas*

Interviewer: *So, do you like football?*

P8: *Yes – I love it*

Interviewer: *Do you wear Nike shoes when you play football?*

P8: *Yes, always ... I love Nike ...when playing football ... just like my Dad did*

In the case of P8 (boy, aged 9) above, the child clearly connects the *Nike* brand with his father's lived experience as a football player. Therefore, the child's connection with the *Nike* brand is supported by interaction with his father and his father's brand (*Nike*). Interestingly, lived experience with brands can belong to parents/caregivers and then transferred to children. For example, P6 provided the following explanation for his important brands:

P6 (boy, aged 9):

Interviewer: *So, what brands are important to you?*

P6: *I would say Nike and Lacoste… my Dad always wears these brands and I think they are nice… so I go for these brands ... but Lacoste don't do children's sizes - they just do men's sizes …. It's only men's sizes*

Interviewer: *- Lacoste ... very interesting ... so what does he have that is Lacoste and Nike?*

P6: *My Dad always wears a Nike tracksuit and Lacoste t-shirts ... and he has Lacoste aftershave*

Therefore, children might have a brand awareness and express brand preferences and also acknowledge their parents'/care givers' lived experience/connection with a particular brand. Consequently, it can be argued that the bond between children and brands can be facilitated through the interpersonal relationships with parents/caregivers. This bond is sophisticated in its nature and based on such categories as 1) parents/caregivers lived experience/ connection with a brand and 2) children's interpersonal relationship with parents/caregivers. Consequently, it can be argued that children have meaningful connections with brands which are embedded into their social relationships with parents/ caregivers.

4.8 Brands and social affiliation

The interviews revealed that whilst children used a wide variety of brands in their lives in their home environment, they were constrained in their choice and use of brands at school. Schools are one of the social places for children where they collectively experience the sense of community and belonging and where they have the shared identities of being pupils/students. This phenomenon can be characterised as a tribal or social community where the nature of the belonging to such groups is not based on their free choice to participate, but rather on the requirements of the education system. Schools, as social communities, are mainly formed by the schools' own rules and policies. Children frequently referred to their school uniforms and these are one of the most obvious symbols of such a social community and children's affiliation to it.

This research identified that children, as consumers, have agreed and shared symbolic meanings which are attached to certain brands which are not constrained by school uniforms. It was identified that children strongly associate some commercial brands with school only. These brands included *Kickers* and *Clarks* footwear. Whilst many children cited footwear brands such as *Adidas*, *Nike* and *Puma* which they gained value from by wearing them at home and out with their friends, it was equally evident that brands such as *Kickers* and *Clarks* provided children with an opportunity to gain a sense of belonging to the school environment and sense of acceptance by their peers at school and, consequently, the sense of community/tribe affiliation. For example P22 (girl, aged 8) and P28 (girl, aged 9) underline the importance of this point:

P22 (girl, aged 8):

> *Interviewer: - Do you have to wear a uniform to school?*
>
> P22*: Yes ... unfortunately ... but not shoes ... we can wear any shoes ...*
>
> *Interviewer: So what shoes do you wear to school?*
>
> P22*: ... I wear my Kickers ... always ... black ones*
>
> *Interviewer: - Are they just for school?*
>
> P22*: Yeah ... they are*
>
> *Interviewer: Are Kickers popular at school?*
>
> P22*: Well ... all my friends wear Kickers*
>
> *Interviewer: - So what do you wear when you're not at school – like going out with friends?*

P22: *These ones … my Nike trainers*

Interviewer: - How does it make you feel when you are wearing your Kickers?

P22: *I feel just fine because everyone wearing them at school…. You sort of can't go wrong when you are wearing them*

P28 (girl, aged 9):

Interviewer: *What about school – what you wear at school?*

P28: *… grey skirt, white shirt …*

Interviewer: - *So it's a school uniform?*

P28: *Yeah … I hate it*

Interviewer: *Can you wear any shoes to school – what shoes do you wear?*

P28: *Kickers – My black Kickers*

Interviewer: *Kickers – you like Kickers?*

P28: *Yeah … I have to wear black shoes … so I wear Kickers*

Interviewer: *So, you like Kickers – do you wear them when you're not at School?*

P28: *No way! I like them … but I need them just for school – all girls wear Kickers … some wear black Nike … I like my Kickers for school*

P5 (girl, aged 9):

Interviewer: *Is there any part of what you have to wear to school that you can choose yourself?*

P5: *Yes – shoes*

Interviewer: - *When you're buying shoes with your Mum, what are you looking for?*

P5: *Shoes other people have*

Interviewer: *You like to be like them – or you like to be different?*

P5: *Like them … but sometimes I like to be different – mainly like them*

Interviewer: *Any particular brand of school shoes that you like?*

P5: *(immediately) Yes – Clarks*

The brands cited above are used by children as a source of affiliation, meaning that these brands hold very strong social and localised symbolic values for children. Interestingly, most of the children had negative feelings and opinions about the school uniforms but clearly demonstrated positive attitudes towards certain commercial brands

which they were only using in the school environment. This highlights that children, when provided with latitude in a highly constrained social community, attach strong symbolic meanings to particular brands. Consequently, it is evident that children have created a sophisticated meaning systems in which brands chosen by them are symbols of belonging. Furthermore, it should be noted that the symbolic meanings of brands are embedded in the context of children's social lives at school where these brands provide children with the social benefits of being accepted by peers. Therefore, brands are important in children's lives, especially in the context of the school environment where they are able to gain the sense of social connection with their peers, in another words these brands provide children with 'linking value'.

4.9 Brands as buttressing children's life-projects

In order to understand the complex nature of the brand relationships phenomenon it is very important to understand all aspects of a child's life. Therefore, the conversation during the interviews sought to uncover different sides of each child's life in order to understand how brands contribute to their daily lives. The research identified that amongst the participants, many have hobbies and interests which contribute significantly to their lives. These hobbies included playing football, supporting football clubs, dancing, shopping and playing computer games. Many of the children had been introduced and/or encouraged to participate in these hobbies and interests by their parents. However, these interviews revealed that, whilst a parent may introduce the child to a hobby or interest, the child does exercise autonomy in terms of further engagement and this includes their brands preferences. Having adopted the autonomic position, the child then tends to develop relationships with certain brands which support the engagement/participation with those hobbies and interests and, consequently, contribute to his/her life-project. These brand relationships played significant roles for children's life-projects because they reflect their selves and meaningful and relevant activities. Significantly, children's hobbies existed in several sociocultural contexts, both social and personal areas. For example, for P5 (girl, aged 9) and P10 (girl, aged 8) dancing, as a hobby is an important part of their lives, in fact both girls have been dancing for more than half of their lives. Both P5 and P10 were initially introduced to dancing as a hobby by their parents. During the interviews P5 and P10 referred to such brands as *Pineapple*, *Capezio* and *Bloch* which they believed identified them as dancers:

P5 (girl, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *OK – what about t-shirts – do you have lots of t-shirts?*
>
> P5: *Yes*
>
> Interviewer: *And do your t-shirts have anything written on them?*
>
> P5: *Some of them do*
>
> Interviewer: *And what do they say – any brands?*
>
> P5: *Lots have Pineapple on them*
>
> Interviewer: *Pineapple?*
>
> P5: *Yes! (very proudly)*
>
> Interviewer: *Why Pineapple?*
>
> P5: *Because it's a dance place – where you go dancing*
>
> Interviewer: *And do you like dancing?*
>
> P5: *Yes! (firmly)*
>
> Interviewer: *And when you go dancing, do you wear your Pineapple t-shirt?*
>
> P5: *Sometimes*
>
> Interviewer: *And do you wear your Pineapple t-shirt when you go shopping with your Mum?*
>
> P5: *Yes, sometimes … and sometimes when I am out with my friends*
>
> Interviewer: *Do any of your friends wear Pineapple t-shirts?*
>
> P5: *Yes … most of them … because we all do dancing*

P10 (girl, aged 8):

> Interviewer: *Do you have any special brands for your dancing?*
>
> P10: *Capezio … and Bloch – they're German brands … they make dancing shoes*
>
> Interviewer: *I know one dance brand – Pineapple?*
>
> P10: *Yeah Pineapple … I love dancing … I'm in my second dancing school … I've been dancing for 4 years*

Children strongly associate certain brands with their hobbies and interests. Furthermore, some brands, for example *Pineapple, Capezio* and *Bloch* are used by children to define themselves in the context of their hobbies and interests and, consequently, they contribute to their life-projects. In other words, the data clearly showed that there is a strong connection between a child's self and specific brands which they associate with their particular hobbies/interests. This connection is highly meaningful and important

for children's self-narrative formations. Consequently, these connections play an important role in the self-identity construction process.

It was also clear from the interviews that children attach the symbolic meanings of fun and enjoyment to such hobby brands. Crucially, the aspects of socialisation with friends through using such brands was strongly revealed. Moreover, the interviews showed that children's social lives were very much dependent on participation in hobbies and interests where these brands played a vital role. For example, P5 (girl, aged 9) strongly demonstrates that the *Pineapple* brand is an essential part of her social life. Furthermore, she clearly disclosed her world in which other brands appeared: *Facebook*, *VideoStars* and *Apple iPad* :

P5, (girl, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *But why particularly an Apple?*
>
> P5: *Because you can do anything on it ... well not anything but they're a bit better than other brands*
>
> Interviewer: *What do you mean "a bit better than other brands"?*
>
> P5: *Well, they do more ... like VideoStars*
>
> Interviewer: *OK – do your friends have an iPhone?*
>
> P5: *Yes, most of them – they are cool but I am using my iPad because I don't have an iPhone yet – I am getting one for Christmas*
>
> Interviewer: *What about your dancing friends, do they have iPads?*
>
> P5: *Yes, mostly and iPhones*
>
> Interviewer: *So you would be able to phone them?*
>
> P5: *Yes, and text them ... share our VideoStars videos and stuff*
>
> Interviewer: *VideoStars? Tell me about VideoStars?*
>
> P5: *I will show you ... I have it on my iPad*
>
> Interviewer: *That's really cool – so you make videos with your dancing friends – then what do you do with them?*
>
> P5: *Well ... we share them on Facebook*
>
> Interviewer: *Facebook? You use Facebook?*
>
> P5: *Yes – all my friends use Facebook*
>
> Interviewer: *All your dancing friends?*
>
> P5: *Almost all my friends are dancers – I met them all at dance school or doing shows ... so yes, all my friends are dancers*

Whereas the girls were quite often introduced to such activities as dancing, boys are frequently introduced to such activities as playing football and supporting football clubs. For example, P11 (boy, aged 8) and his family supported *West Ham FC*, and P1 (boy, aged 9) and his family supported *Chelsea FC*. It was identified during the interviews with the children that engagement with football club brands was supportive in its nature. In other words, possession and engagement with these types of brands/ brand extensions support children's social relationships and help them develop a sense of belonging to a tribe, in this case, a fan club.

For example, P11 (boy, aged 8), when asked what important things he had in his room, immediately replied "my *West Ham [FC]* duvet cover". At the time of the interview he was wearing a *West Ham FC* t-shirt and he explained in detail and at length that he was a "big fan of *West Ham*" and that he also had two other *West Ham FC* shirts and continually repeated that he was a big fan. It was very evident that P11 possessed emotional attachment towards the brand and its extensions. P11 went on later in the interview to explain how members of his family were big fans, although he admitted that he had never seen them play a live match. Interestingly, P11, when asked if *West Ham FC* were successful, replied that he supported them irrespective of whether they were winning or not and clearly displayed great loyalty to the brand. Interestingly, the t-shirt he was wearing also had an *Adidas* logo printed on it and when asked whether he was a *Nike* or *Adidas* person, he immediately replied "I'm an *Adidas* person" further underlying his commitment and loyalty to the brand. Furthermore, when P11, was asked whether his friends supported *West Ham FC*, he replied "no" and highly emphasised that all his family supported *West Ham FC*. Clearly, P11 and his family derived social benefit from the relationships they shared with the *West Ham FC* brand with it acting in the role of mediator for family relations.

Therefore, in the context of hobbies/ interests, brands hold a very significant meaning for children. On one hand, children are using these brands and their symbolic meanings to define themselves, for example as dancers and football fans, whereas on the other hand the role that these brands play in their lives is to support their social relationships with peers and family members. Consequently, there is clear evidence that brands contribute to their self-identity construction. Also, these brands provide them with more enjoyable and more fulfilling lives.

4.10 Brands as leisure resources

The interviews clearly demonstrated that entertainment and fun at home are extremely important to children. Interestingly, few of the children interviewed referred to entertainment activities outside the home, underlining the importance of the home as a place of entertainment and fun for them. The role of brands is clearly identified and that is to provide both functional and experiential benefits associated with entertainment and fun.

During the interviews most of the children, when asked what things they considered were important to them, began by listing all of the electronic items which they had at home. These included TVs, computers, mobile phones, tablet computers and game consoles. For example, *P4 (boy, aged 8)* very quickly replied: *"My computer, X-box, TV ... are the most important things for me"*. Other children disclosed such brands as: *X-box*, *iPhone*, *Samsung* and *Gru* during the conversations about entertainment and their lives at home. Therefore, brand awareness was clearly identified and it was established that these brands provide significant benefits to children which are extremely meaningful in their lives.

Furthermore, analysis revealed that children had definite perceptions of the brands they use at home. Children very clearly perceived brands they used at home as major sources of entertainment and this is the purpose, they believe, they serve in their lives. For example, P1 (boy, aged 9) during the interview made it clear that he spends most of his free time at home in the living room playing with his *X-box*. He further explained that for him it is very important to be entertained at all times and, without brands, this would be impossible. Another participant P3 (boy, aged 5) when explaining what items were important to him, immediately replied*:*

> *… my computer, I always play with the computer… I play Despicable me… Gru is my favourite because he is funny… when I watched the movie, he always makes children laugh…*

Additionally, P5, (girl, aged 9) firmly explained why she preferred her *IPad* to her *Play mobile*:

> *I always do something on my iPad because it is more fun … we (children) should have fun in our lives*

Therefore, this research identifies that children derive great value from the functional characteristics of brands, in other words, different product attributes which provide functional utility for children and, consequently, the desire to be entertained at home is achieved. It was established that children greatly value the functional characteristics of certain brands and they have a high level of brand awareness. Hence, it was clear that brands which children use for the purposes of entertainment are making their lives at home more complete and bringing them happiness. Thus, children on one hand, perceive brands as a resource of entertainment in which the actual functional characteristics of the brands are highly valued and, on the other hand, children perceive these brands as prime sources of the emotional values of joy and happiness. For example:

P8 (boy, aged 9) said:

> *For my birthday I got the latest X-box ... I am planning to play every day ... and I will never be bored ... just happy*

P4 (boy, aged 8) explained during the conversation about his important brands at home:

> *I play with them (brands) all day ... it would be no fun without these things in my home*

Therefore, children clearly derive both experiential and functional benefits from their brands.

Consequently, this research identifies that children have a strong connection with their brands where the home environment is perceived as the place for entertainment and the happiness that it brings. The nature of this connection can be understood through the brands' benefits which are relevant to the interviewed children's lives. Firstly, brands at home are perceived as sources of entertainment which all of the children desired. Secondly, brands here also provide children with emotional values and are seen by them as providers of happiness and joy. Consequently, the home context should not be overlooked because children have specific associations with these brands at home, in this case as the provider of happiness and joy. Furthermore, these relationships bring meaning to the lives of children at home because of the desire to be entertained and, consequently, happy which is clearly identified.

Clearly, the findings above show that children's relationships with brands are frequently built upon emotional values and important symbolic meanings in children's lives. However, the functional attributes of brands from different product categories provides an important basis for children's brands relationships and this has also been evidenced in the data analysis. Children frequently refer to brands that are significant to them because of the functional aspects of brands. Examples include:

P5 (girl, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *OK – three words to describe how you feel about Converse?*
> P5: *Comfortable ...*

P2 (girl, aged 8):

> P2: *Emmmm for the winter, now for the summer I would go for Converse and for the winter... emmm for the winter I would like BK's...*
> Interviewer: *BK? I never heard about them…*
> P2: *British Knights ....*
> Interviewer: *Oh, ok…why BKs?*
> P2: *Because they are fluffy inside and they keep you a lot warmer in the winter*

P6 (boy, aged 9) and P7 (boy, aged 9), two boys in discussion about what they would like as presents, also revealed that shoes providing the utility aspect of comfort and would influence their brand preference:

> Interviewer: *What sort of presents did you receive recently? For Christmas for example?*
> P6: *I was expecting a new pair of shoes but I didn't … I wanted Huaraches … but I still have my money...*
> P7: *I've got special toys*
> P6: *I will be very happy if I get Huaraches*
> P7: *... and other people would be so jealous*
> P6: *'Coz they look nice and comfortable*
> P7: *Yeah, the Huaraches are so comfortable*

P30 (girl, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *Any particular brand of skinny jeans?*
>
> P30: *No – stretchy skinny jeans because they are cool and comfortable*
>
> Interviewer: *No particular brand of jeans?*
>
> P30: *No, not really – just comfortable ones*

P17 (boy, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *Tell me why you like Nike so much?*
>
> P17: *Because they last a long time ... they are good quality ...*
>
> Interviewer: *Good quality – what does it mean?*
>
> P17: *Well (thinking) ... comfortable, very comfortable ... and they are well made and last a long time*

P8 (boy, aged 9):

> Interviewer: *So you would wear your Adidas track suit to school on non-uniform days?*
>
> P8: *Yeah, definitely – and trainers*
>
> Interviewer: *You would wear your Adidas track-suit and trainers – which trainers?*
>
> P8: *Yeah, my Adidas track suit and my Adidas trainers*
>
> Interviewer: *Because you would feel cool?*
>
> P8: *No ... because they are relaxed ... you know ... so comfortable ... and I don't want to overdress like others do on these days*
>
> Interviewer: *So not because they are the Adidas brand?*
>
> P8: *Because they are comfortable ...*

All the above interviewees made clear that they valued the functional aspects of their brands. Therefore, the relationships with brands here are based on varying proportions of emotional and functional elements of their respective brands and the latter is clearly and equally important for a child brand meaningful connection. Therefore, children's brand relationships are taking place in the children's worlds, where the role of brands is to provide both functional and experiential/emotional benefits to them.

Summary

The aim of this research was to explore children's relationships with their brands. Ten main themes have emerged from the data analysis. It was revealed that children do have meaningful relationships with brands which serve different purposes in their lives. Brands and children's relationships with them bring value to the different aspects of their lives. The role of symbolic meanings of various brands have been explored and it was evident that brands contribute to the different aspects of the child's self-concept. Different social contexts have been studied such as the school environment, the home environments and the digital age in order to better understand the nature of the child connections with brands. Therefore, this chapter argues that children do have relationships with brands and they attach both social and individual meanings to the brands. Furthermore, these brands are used by children in a symbolic way. The next section of this research will be devoted to the discussion and critical evaluation of the findings provided here.

Chapter 5 – Discussion and analysis

Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the discussion and analysis of the findings which are provided in the previous chapter. The relevant theoretical underpinnings are discussed here in relation to children and their relationships with brands. The discussion focuses on the children's brands and their supportive role for their self-esteem, self-presentation and self-image. It further analyses the concept of "cool" and examines the role that brands play as tools for social categorisation. The aspects of children's gender identity construction and the role of brands here is discussed. Furthermore, interesting insights are provided into the supportive roles that brands play in children's transition from childhood to the teenage status. Children's fantasy worlds and the role of brands within them is discussed and children's social relationships and the embedded role of brands is explored. Additionally, brands and social affiliation, children's life-projects and the supportive role of brands are discussed followed by an exploration into children and the functional benefits of their brands. Consequently, this chapter reveals the valuable and meaningful roles that brands play in children's daily lives.

5.1 Brand relationships in supporting children's self-esteem

This research reveals that children have meaningful connections with technological brands. These connections help them to feel connected to the digital age in which they live and provide them with the feelings of competency. Also, analysis of the data demonstrated that children have a very clear understanding of the existence of the digital age in which they live and expressed that technological brands are the most significant brands in their lives. In this research, the digital age is viewed as being an important social context in which children engage with a variety of different technological brands which contribute to their self-esteem.

Having briefly summarised the findings of the first theme above, it is worthy to discuss the position of children in this research and its connection to the technologies in general. Children have a very distinct social position based on the principles of New Sociology in this research and that is that they have their own opinions, voices and autonomy. This approach enables this research to gain a very deep understanding of (1) children as

consumers and (2) the importance of brands/technological brands in their lives, as opposed to the widely used consumer socialisation approach which is fully discussed in the Literature Review chapter. Interestingly, the digital age and technological brands were the starting point of changing the views of sociologists who previously studied children in a linear way. In relation to this, Lee (2001) sees the new approach as a social phenomenon which has occurred as the result of the development in consumer society since the 1950s and 1960s where different domestic technologies (washing machines, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners) started to be available to ordinary families. These technologies were key elements to the "cocooning" of families and children, meaning that children were viewed as a "becomings" rather than beings with their own voices. Interestingly, Lee (2001, p.159) argues that 'television brought about a penetration of that cocoon'. He explains that television gave children power and brought a 'shop window' into homes through which children could practice their independency. Consequently, the research here concurs with Lee's (2001) idea that the development of consumer society is closely connected to the development of domestic technologies. This thesis identifies that family homes and children's worlds at home contain a variety of technological brands (including X-box, iPad, Samsung and TVs) and children are able to use and interact with these brand as independent individuals and consumers and use these brands for their own unique purposes. This research shows that children do have their own highly interesting voices and opinions about the digital age in which they live and the associated brands.

Moving forward in the discussion of the technological brands and children as consumers, it is important to acknowledge the Mick & Fournier (1998) notion that the field of consumer behaviour research has paid very little attention to technologies. They made an attempt to study technologies and consumers' views, meanings and emotional reactions to them. The result of their study was to provide a conceptual framework which explains the paradox of technological products in consumers' lives. This framework included eight different paradoxes which explain a sophisticated nature and effect of the ownerships of the different technologies for consumers. One of the paradoxes addresses the category of competence/ incompetence and is pertinent to the research here. This paradox is explained in terms of how 'technology can facilitate feelings of intelligence or efficacy, and technology can lead to feelings of ignorance or ineptitude' (Mick & Fournier, 1998, p.126). Furthermore, they argue that those in the older age category tend to demonstrate negative feelings for technologies. In line with

Mick & Fournier (1998), this research identifies that children as consumers recognise the importance of the digital age in which they are living and that technologies are a significant part of it. Interestingly, the research data here reveals that, for the young consumers, their experience with the different forms of technologies is not frustrating at all but rather positive, meaningful and exciting. The findings of this research provide evidence that children have a strong feeling of competency which is generated through ownership/engagement with these technologies. Whereas the Mick & Fournier (1998) research was devoted to the technologies in consumers' lives, this research focuses on the brands/brand relationships themselves. Then, through the interviews, the technological brands are identified as an important category for the discourse of children's relationships with brands.

The findings of this research show clearly that children connect to the technological brands in a positive and meaningful way. Furthermore, they have symbolic understanding and association with these brands. Existing literature on consumer brand relationships suggests that brand symbolism is an important category which can contribute to the consumer self-concept and explain consumer brand relationships (Alendin, 2012; Achenreiner & John, 2003; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Also, Escalas & Bettman (2003) opine that brand-meaning is formed through the different set of brand associations. In the current study, the symbolic meanings of technological brands, and children's associations with them, are seen as valuable categories which uncover the nature of the children's connections with these brands. Interestingly, Achereiner & John (2003) argue that children are able to think about brands at the level of their symbolic meanings. Furthermore, they, in their experimental study, argue that children of 8 years old and younger do not recognise and possess the symbolic meanings of brands. They based their findings on the child-developmental psychology approach and were mainly interested in the children's brands-related judgements. As opposed to the Achereiner & John (2003) research, the findings of this research reveal that that children perceive and associate technological brands as representors/symbols of the digital age and that this occurs at ages younger than 8. Furthermore, it was clear from the interviews that these technological brands are almost essential in their lives and they engage with them almost on a daily basis. Hence, this research supports and addresses the arguments of Nairn *et al*. (2008) and Martens *et al*. (2004) that in order to enhance the understanding of children's connections with brands, scholars should amplify their views on children

and move from developmental and experiential approaches to study children and adopt approaches which see children more autonomously.

The symbolic meanings of brands, self-concept and individual's entire life-understanding are categories which uncover the sophisticated, purposive and meaningful nature of consumer's brand relationships (Aledin, 2012; Nairn *et al.,* 2008; Kates, 2000; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998, 2009). Brand relationships contribute to an individual's self-concept and consumer connection with a brand is formed when they use brand associations in order to communicate and/or construct their self-concepts (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998;). In line with these ideas, the research here identifies that technological brands are also playing a very purposive and meaningful role in children's lives. These brands provide them with the feelings of competence and confidence. These feelings are related to the well-established concept of self-esteem and these feelings have been obtained by children through the interaction and ownership of their technological brands (Stets & Bruke, 2014; McDonald & Wearing, 2013).

The current study proposes to use the self-efficacy dimension in order to understand children's connections with technological brands. This dimension is valuable in the context of children's brand relationships because the study here reveals that children define themselves as "experts" which is seen as a positive self-assessment. This is supported by Stets & Bruke (2014, p.411) who argue that 'efficacy-based esteem is about what "one can do" in a situation compared with worth-based esteem that emphasises who one is.' Furthermore, existing literature very often conceptualises self-esteem through self-efficacy and self-worth and it is noted that self-efficacy contributes to self-worth (Cast & Burke, 2002; Ervin & Stryker, 2001; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Franks & Marolla, 1976; Owens, 1993). Therefore, the self-efficacy and self-worth dimensions can be used in order to explain the children's connections with their technological brands. Whilst the existing research on self-esteem and materialism mainly focuses on such aspects as acceptance and worthwhileness, possessions, feelings of happiness, insecurity, acceptance, and others (Bottomley *et al.*, 2010; Chaplin & John, 2007; Nairn *et al.*, 2003; Belk *et al.,* 1984) the research here provides an understanding of the benefits children gain from their relationships with technological brands rather than reasons and factors of children's self-esteem enhancement. The research here explores children's self-esteem in the broader perspective where the digital age is a social context of children's lives and technological brands are part of it.

This is different to the Chaplin & John (2007) and Bottomley *et al.* (2010) research. Chaplin & John (2007, p.490) based their research on the principles of Piagetian developmental psychology and argue that materialism and self-esteem are strongly connected and 'a drop in self-esteem experienced by many children as they enter adolescence triggers a focus on material goods, primarily as a means of self-enhancement'. Bottomley *et al.* (2010) also conducted quantitative research where the primary focus was on children's materialism, self-esteem and socio-economic status. They concluded that materialism is linked to low self-esteem where the family dynamics have been taken as a basis to explain this phenomenon.

Having explained the ideas above, this research argues that children as consumers have highly purposive and meaningful relationships with technological brands which contributes to their self-esteem and helps them to define themselves. This helps children to position themselves in the world where the digital age cannot be simply ignored. Moreover, research on adult consumers well acknowledges that brands help consumers to obtain the feelings of belonging to certain groups and/or help them to define themselves or differentiate themselves which highlights the purposive nature of the consumer brand relationships (Kates, 2000; Nairn *et al.,* 2008; Belk, 1988). Additionally, Aledin (2012) argues that teenagers do have self-connections with brands which support them in their daily lives. The research here extends existing ideas of consumer brand relationships because it shows that not only adults and teenagers gain benefits from relationships with brands, but also children.

In summary, consumers develop their self-concept by using the appropriate symbolic meanings of goods which, as Levy (1959, p.119) terms the process which 'joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself'. In line with consumer culture research, the data analysis here reveals that children perceive technological brands as symbols of the digital age (Levy, 1959; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998) meaning that children attach symbolic meanings to brands which they use in order to interpret themselves and the world around them. Children in this research defined themselves as "experts" which is seen as a positive self-assessment. Furthermore, feeling of competence and confidence have been clearly expressed amongst the children which illustrates that their self-esteem is enhanced through the interaction and ownership of their technological brands. Also, it is evident that, very often, the process of self-evaluation includes the interaction with other individuals such

as grandparents and peers from which children were able to gain positive responses which allows them to form a self-definition of expertise and, consequently, judge their personal self-worth. Therefore, the digital age cannot be ignored in children's consumer culture research. This research argues that children are able to position themselves in this complex world through their relationships with their technological brands. They form connections with their technological brands in order to feel connected to the digital age in which they live. This connection is purposive and meaningful for children's lives. Consequently, it can be assumed that children gain emotional benefits from their technological brands.

5.2 Brands for children's self-construction: self-image and self-presentation

The research here argues that children form meaningful and valuable relationships with brands. This section explains how cartoon brands and fashion brands contribute to different sides of children's lives. More specifically, the research here demonstrates that these brands contribute to individual and social aspects of children's selves. The research findings reveal that cartoon brands with distinctive brand personalities and fashion brands with meaningful-to-children symbolic meanings are contributing to the children's self-construction. It was identified that these brand categories are significant for the social lives of children and their self-presentations. Jose (2014, p. 65) claims that:

> '… children are by instinct attracted to cartoon characters. Fictional characters like Donald Duck, Micky Mouse, Spiderman, and Phantom have ruled the imagination of kids since time immemorial.'

Cartoon characters are seen in this research as brands with very strong and distinctive brand personalities. Thomson (2006) additionally argues that celebrities could be considered as brands because they have features of a brand phenomenon such as image, distinctive personalities, messages, and so forth. In line with Thomson (2006), cartoon characters are seen as brand relationship partners of children in this research because they obtain similar characteristics to celebrities. Additionally, some cartoon characters are anthropomorphised and used by marketers as very effective promotional tools. Significantly, Veer (2013) explains that children might create an emotional relationship with a brand which has anthropomorphised mascots. Moreover, brand relationship theory is based on the assumption that consumers have bonds with brands because they

tend to humanise and anthropomorphise them (Fournier, 1998; Aaker, 1997; Levy, 1985). Therefore, in line with the classic brand relationship assumptions, cartoon characters are brands which are seen as children's relationships partners.

This section now explores how and why children connect to this brand category. The findings of this research reveal that children have self-goal driven relationships with brands. This finding is in keeping with the Escalas & Bettman (2005) claim that brands are linked to an individual's self when they help to achieve social integration, personal accomplishment, connect to the past, express individuality, differentiate oneself, and other self-goals. It is important to note that interpersonal needs and motives are key to improve the understanding of how and why consumers relate at the social level with different brands (Long *et al.,* 2012; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In this research, the relationships approach is applied to the concept of cartoon brand personality in keeping with Aaker & Fournier's (1995, p.392) view, where 'the brand is treated as an active, contributing member of a relationship dyad that joins the consumer and the brand'. Aaker (1999) argues that, in various situational contexts, individuals tend to highlight specific characteristics of their personalities by selecting brands which hold relevant personality dimensions. For the children in this research, the cartoon characters, more specifically the brand personalities of particular cartoon characters, are the sources which provide them with human traits which helps them to improve, or achieve, enhanced social relationships, and thereby satisfy their self-goals. This finding can be explained through the existing consumer culture theory literature.

Levy (1959) made a significant contribution to the understanding of consumer behaviour and consumer culture by claiming that consumers buy goods for their social and/or personal symbolic meanings in additional to their functional characteristics. He also argues that each individual tends to enhance their sense of self and the appropriate symbolic meanings of brands/goods is used in order to achieve it. Furthermore, brands as a symbolic resource for the construction of identity is well identified by Elliot & Wattanasuwan (1998). Traditionally, in CCT the perception of brand personality is formed through the consumers' contact with brand. This could happen through the particular people which are associated with the brand (the brand's product endorsees) where human characteristics are directly transferred to the brand and hence the brand personality is formed. Also, perception of brand personality could be formed indirectly

through product-related attributes, brand name, logo, and other presentation strategies/ strategy-oriented approaches (Batra et *al*., 1993; McCracken, 1989; Plummer, 1985).

In line with the above, the findings of this research reveal that children at the age of 5 were able to recognise the personality of brands (cartoon characters) and also use these attributes in such a way that they proved to be important for their own individual self-identities and this is in line with the research by Elliot & Leonard (2004). However, there are differences: (1) their research addresses the Nike brand where the socio-economic environment and commonality of meanings principle was taken as a basis to understand the brand personality perception/formation and (2) their research used the principles of the Piagetian cognitive-developmental psychology approach and therefore, the chosen age range was 8-12 years old, according to their (Piagetian) cognitive abilities. It is significant to note that brand personality formation for the Nike brand and, for example, Gru (a cartoon character brand which is identified in this research as being important for children) is different in its nature. It could be argued that the brand personality of Gru is formed through the originators and enhanced by marketers rather than through the shared conceptions. Gru's personality broadly aligns with Aaker's (1997) "sincerity" dimension because children perceived his personality as being cheerful and funny. This concept is fully addressed in section 2.5.

Having explained the difference between the research approaches, the findings of the research here and those of Elliot & Leonard (2004) are consistent in relation to the children's willingness to transfer/incorporate the cartoon brand personality into their own identities in order to improve their social relationships.

The cartoon characters as brands are quite different from the traditional brand concept and the most significant difference is that traditional brands take some sort of objective form, but still the findings of the research here supports the classic notion of Belk (1988, p.147) who claims that 'relationships with objects are never a two-way (person-thing), but always three-way (person-thing-person)'. In this research, the children formed the relationships with cartoon brands in order to widen their circle of friends and create a particular self-presentation. Brand relationship theory is based on the idea that consumers tend to anthropomorphise brands. Furthermore, the brand-personality or brands as human concepts are key for better understanding and explaining the connections between consumers and their brands (Aaker *et al*., 2004; Fournier, 1998).

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Aaker (1999, p.45) claims that brands which can be associated with personality traits could provide 'self-expressive or symbolic benefits for the consumer'. It has been clarified in the research here that cartoon characters have very distinctive brand personalities which children easily recognise and tend to incorporate their human traits into their selves, and consequently, develop relationships with these particular brands.

The self-expansion theory, which is well used in consumer behaviour research (Huang & Mitchel, 2014) is applied in the research here in order to understand children's relationships with cartoon brands. Aron *et al*. (1995) stress that the "self" is expanded if the individual includes elements of other individuals into his/her self. The self-expansion theory is based on the assumption that individuals tend to have relationships with others in order to acquire others' resources and characteristics because humans are driven by the desire to rapidly expand (Aron *et al*., 1998). Huang & Mitchel (2014, p.43) argue that:

> 'If consumers are easily able to personify their brands, their personification of brands can become perceptual reality. When this happens, self-expansion theory is effective in explaining brand relationships.'

The research here supports the aforementioned idea and clearly identifies that children expand their selves through the cartoon brands because they incorporate the identified human traits of cartoon brands into their self-images in order to improve their social selves and achieve their personal goal of social acceptance. This demonstrates a supportive role of these brands in children's lives. This supportive role of brands shows that children have close relationships with brands where their identities (brand's and child's identities) overlap and consequently, the supportive role of brands for children's social lives is clearly identified in line with Reiman *et al.* (2012). Therefore, this research concurs firmly with the position of Fournier (2009, p.13) in that:

> 'we forget that relationships are merely facilitators, not ends in and of themselves. A strong relationship develops not by driving brand involvement, but by supporting people in living their lives'.

The findings of this research reveal that children are not only able to easily recognise the brand personality for example of Gru ("he is funny"), but also are able to recognise the reaction of other children towards this particular human trait. This research

identifies that children formed relationships with these cartoon-brands with personalities which matched their own.

Therefore, the concept of consumer brand relationship congruency should not be overlooked here. Children's brand relationships with cartoon brands can be understood through each child's individual self-concept and congruency with a particular cartoon brand. This refers to social identity theory which is fundamental for the understanding of children's relationships with cartoon-brands because this theory is widely used in consumer research and discloses the idea that consumers relate better to those objects/brands which represent consumers' selves and/or desired selves (Sirgy, 1982). In the research here, the findings provide an example of a child who has a brand relationship with a particular cartoon brand (Gru) as opposed to having relationships with other cartoon brands. Therefore, this supports the ideas of Sirgy (1992) who claims that consumers tend to create strong brand relationships with brands which are congruent with their self-concept. Therefore, the research here supports the notion that cartoon brands can be seen as expressions of the children's identities (Veer, 2013; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Reed, 2004). Consequently, the finding of the research here emphasise the benefits which children are obtaining from their close relationship with cartoon brands.

Whereas children connect to cartoon brands where they incorporate the human characteristics into the self-identities, fashion brands are also identified as valuable sources for children's self-construction and self-presentation. Fashion brands such as *Huarache* (*Nike* trainers) and *Adidas* have been identified in the Findings chapter as significant brands for children's lives. These brands are used by children in order to gain popularity and also act as symbols of their personal achievements. This is in line with classic notion that brands have symbolic meanings which go beyond functional benefits, utilitarian characteristics and commercial value and these symbolic meanings are used to create and define their selves (Levy,1959).

The research here identifies that the *Huarache (Nike)* brand has the symbolic meaning of popularity to children. It can be assumed that this symbolic meaning was constructed through the efforts of the advertisers of this company and through the social spheres of children where they engage with peers and form/ negotiate symbols of popular culture. Therefore, McCracken's (1986) model of meaning-transfer is applied here in order to

understand better the connection between brands and children's selves and meanings which they attach to these fashion brands. McCracken (1986) argues that cultural meanings originate in human communities through the different categories: age, occupation, class, status and many others. He further explains that these meanings are transferred from the culturally constituted world to the goods through instruments such as advertising, the fashion system and consumption rituals. Simply, he explains: 'world to good and good to individuals'. One of the main ideas from his research is that consumers are active in decoding meanings from advertisements and the fashion system in order 'to constitute crucial parts of the self and the world' (McCracken, 1986, p.80). It is important to recognise in the research here that the *Nike (Huarache)* brand, as a symbol of popularity, is a socially constructed phenomenon. Children themselves attach that meaning to this particular brand and it is not necessarily that they adopted the symbolic meaning in a direct manner from the marketers' efforts. This notion is also supported by Marion & Nairn (2011) who clarify that, although the fashion industry provides consumers with different symbols for the construction of the particular identity projects, consumers do not perceive these symbols in a direct manner but rather they modify and manipulate these symbols to make them their own and make them fit their own lives. Moreover, the research here identifies that children create their own world through the active appropriation and modification of the information and resources (here the *Nike* brand) of the adult world. This is consistent with the Corsaro (2005) notion of the children's active position in both cultures: children's and adults'.

Although it is important to understand the nature of the formation of the symbolic meanings of brands, it is more important to understand how/why children use these meanings in their daily lives. The research here argues that children's personal self-goals to create social connections with others is the basis for the child's brand dyad (with the *Nike* brand). Significantly, brands as a social tool for the creation of connections with others, and positioning oneself in the society, has been well recognised in consumer culture research across adults and different social groups (Swaminathan *et al*., (2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Kates, 2000). Therefore, the findings in this research are consistent with existing research in that children use brands as social tools to construct their identity projects and gain popularity through the communication of who they are. Furthermore, the findings here are strongly supported and explained using the well-developed theories of self-presentation, self-identity and the theory of symbolic meanings of brands which are developed by Goffman (1959),

Belk (1988) and Elliott & Wattanusawan (1998). The research here argues that for children, their brands are self-expressive. Goffman (1959) explains the concept of self-presentation as "impression management". The concept of self-presentation which has been developed by Goffman (1959) is used here in order to explore children's brand connections and the importance of these connections for their social relationships. Goffman (1959) uses the terminology from dramaturgy and sees individuals as actors who are performing (social interactions) in their everyday lives and shaping their identities. The research here adopts Goffman's (1959) idea where children are viewed as actors who tend to manage the impression they make on others (in this case their peers) in different social situations. This is linked to the recent findings of Rodhain & Aurier (2016) who claim that children's relationships with brands is a highly social phenomenon. It is affected by, and affecting social interactions children have in their different social spheres. Therefore, the research here supports the views of Rodhain & Aurier (2016) and applies Goffman's theatrical approach to better understand children's self-presentations in the context of their relationships with brands. Precisely, children's social interactions with their peers, impressions which they willing to make on each other and children's social identity formation refers to the socialisation process. Significantly, socialisation with social agents (peers, media, and others) is the basis for the formation of the symbolic meanings and their interpretation and consequently, the formation of the children's social selves. This is consistent with the ideas of Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998) who argue that the socialisation process is a significant element of the consumer's world formation. Correspondingly, the proposition of the research here is different from the John (1999) idea that children pass through the socilisation processes in order to become adult consumers. Instead, the research here demonstrates the active position of children in the formation of the symbolic meanings of brands and moreover reveals the importance of these meanings in children's lives and that is gaining popularity, creating social relationships with others and achieving popularity status. The processes of socialisation in this research plays a rather supportive but not main role for children as consumers. Therefore, the research here supports the Cook (2010) and Corsaro (2005) propositions that the children's world/children and their active position and socialisation processes should be studied together with the consumption, culture, social context and socialisation agents. The research here argues that this approach provides a very rich and interesting insight into children and their relationships with brands.

To continue, the current research argues that Goffman's (1959) ideas of self-presentation could be used here in order to understand children's relationships with popular brands. The children's performance, in other words their activities/interactions, requires them to have "fronts" which Goffman (1959, p.13) defines as 'part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in general and a fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance'.

In the current study, children explain that, during the "play" which can be seen as the time when they can "perform" their selves in the desirable way, they control their self-impression through the brands (for example the *Huarache/ Nike brand*). The brands here are seen as symbolic vehicles which are an important part of the children's appearances. Therefore, the brands can be seen as a part of the children's personal "fronts" or appearance which convey a symbol of popularity and help them to achieve the social status of popularity. This is consistent with the idea of Goffman (1959) in that personal fronts can include: facial expressions, age, sex, clothing and according to the research here, also brands. Interestingly, Goffman (1959) clarifies that appearance is one of the parts of the personal front and it is a reflection of social status. In the context of the research here, popularity is seen as a social status which is represented by the brand.

Consequently, it is argued here that children's brand relationships with fashion brands are self-expressive and contribute to the formation of their self-images and self-identities. It is important to note here that the social interaction (performance) is a significant element of the relationships children have with brands. This echoes with Rodhain & Aurier (2016) and their ideas which have been discussed above. Moreover, the research here argues that children's engagement with the *Nike* brand is performative in its nature therefore, not only the symbolic meanings contribute to the children's engagements with the brand, but also children's performance/ interactions with others. In other words, the role of children in their brands relationship is performative.

The research here illustrates that the *Huarache /Nike* brand is a brand which stimulates the children's actions to perform their self-images in a specific way which allows them to achieve the popularity status they desire. This highlights a very complex nature of a brand which is highlighted by Diamond *et al*. (2009) and supports the proposition of Lury (2004) and Nakassis (2012) in that brands are highly performative in their nature. Diamond *et al*. (2009) propose the term brand *gestalt* which represents brands as a

complex system of different elements (brand knowledge, symbols and signs) which provides power to the brand if synergy between the various elements is achieved. The research here argues that brand associations, symbolic meanings, actions (performances) contribute to the brand-formation and this aligns well with the Lucarelli & Hallin (2015) proposition. Consequently, the research here argues that the performative nature of brands is a significant part of the children's relationships with them. Furthermore, in line with Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) the research here claims that social engagements are a part of the performativity. Furthermore, the research here identifies that the symbolic meanings of the popularity of the *Nike* brand is collectively created and shared through the social engagements. Therefore, it is important to recognise that, without this shared element, such meaning of brands no longer exists and consequently, the relationships with the brands will also disappear.

Relationships with fashion brands are also important to children for their desired social positions. The research here clearly identifies that children wish to be popular with peers which can be linked to the ideas of fitting in and/or the creation of social positions. These ideas are similar to those of Piacentini (2010). She proposes the idea that clothes and their symbolic meanings are important for children's lives because they help them to communicate parts of their self-identities to others. Significantly, Piacentini (2010) uses the term "clothes" rather than brands in order to explain the "fashion and children" theme. This can be seen critically because the brands as a phenomenon is much more complex than the term "clothes" as discussed above. However, this research broadly agrees with Piacentini's (2010) proposed ideas.

The research here argues that brands bring value to children's lives. The nature of this value is based on the meanings which have been attached to the brands. More specifically, these brands are used as social communication tools and can be seen as a significant part of the social communication system and children's culture. Furthermore, whereas some brands help children to gain popularity, others help children to highlight their personal achievements. Richins (1994) argues that the value of possessions is formed through the meanings which are attached to them. Also, Solomon (1983, p.324) argues that 'products are consumed for both their social and private meanings'. He further opines that symbolic meanings of products could be better understood in the context of the social reality. Solomon (1983) explains that symbolism is essential for the meanings-formations and these meanings are used by individuals in

order to understand others and support their own social identities. Solomon (1983) also concurs with Sirgy (1982) who argues that individuals have many self-concepts which they support with the brands which hold different meaning for specific situations.

Richins (1994, p.506) explains the phenomenon of private meanings/personal meanings of an object in terms of 'the sum of the subjective meanings that objects hold for a particular individual'. However, she also emphasises that these meanings could include some elements of public/shared meanings but in this case, the role of personal history needs to be acknowledged. The research here identifies that children attach private symbolic meanings to fashion brands (for example, in this case the *Adidas* brand). The private meaning which has been identified in this research is the meaning of personal-achievement which children attach to some fashion brands. Consequently, it could be argued that children form relationships with brands and these relationships contribute to their self-concept. The aspect of self-achievement has been identified as an important element which children tend to support through the fashion brands. Moreover, sociologists clearly identify that achievements are highly important for children, especially for boys (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992). It is evident that children associate some fashion brands with personal-achievements and possession of such brands helps them to position themselves in this world. Consequently, in the research here, such brands such as *Gru, Nike* and *Adidas* play significant roles for children's identities and their social lives. On one hand these brands help them to complete their self-concept with characteristics which they might lack but desire in order to achieve their social goals. On the other hand, brands play the role of social tools which have strong symbolic meanings which children use in order to present themselves and achieve a particular position in the society. Also, this research demonstrates that brands are significant for children's individual selves and help them to perceive themselves in a more positive way. Therefore, this research argues that children have meaningful and valuable relationships with brands which contribute to the different sides of their lives.

5.3 Symbolic brands as tools for social categorisation

This section is devoted to the concept of "cool" and children's relationships with brands. The research here identifies a specific brand (*Apple*) which children describe as a cool brand. It is important to note that "cool" is a slang word and that the concept of cool has evolved and continues to evolve over time. The current view on this is concept

is tied to the ideas of branding and consumption. Belk *et al.* (2010, p. 286) argue that 'the quest to be cool is now a major driver of global consumer culture.' Also, Frank (1997, p.7) proposes and explains an interesting theory of co-optation in that 'business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture' and argues that the understanding of the business practices, more specifically advertisements, is significant for the interpretation of the counterculture. Then, his analysis concludes that the Sixties in America and the development of advertising and fashion industries have changed the authentic cultural cool to a commercially facilitated cool concept.

This concept is explored by different scholars in the context of children as consumers and consumer culture in general. The findings of this research indicate that children use some brands and their symbolic meanings as tools in order to judge other people and position themselves into a particular social category, namely that of cool. The research here supports the findings of, for example, Ross & Harradine (2004) who argue that children between the ages of 9 - 11 years have a reasonable level of brands awareness, in other words, they are able to recognise and recall brands names and have clear brand perceptions which they are able to articulate. Furthermore, these authors used sports brands (*Reebok, Adidas, Nike, Umbro, Hi-Tec* and *Le Coq Sportif*) for their research and claim that children from this age category describe sports brands as important objects which help them to 'stand out from the crowd and be different', or to be cool (Ross & Harradine, 2004, p.108). Echoing the findings of Ross & Harradine (2004), the findings of the current study identify the *Apple* brand as a symbol of popular culture which represents an additional product category to the well-studied sports brands. This product category is used as a research vehicle to better understand children as consumers and their relationships with brands. This finding is widening the existing research on sports brands and child consumer culture which has been undertaken, for example by Hogg *et al.* (1998) and Ross & Harradine (2004). The concept and meaning of cool has a long history and could be studied from different perspectives, however the findings of this research supports the idea that the concept of cool is branded, commodified and commercialised (Belk *et al.,* 2010; Nairn *et al.,* 2008).

The discussion here is focused on the *Apple* brand because children clearly attached great symbolic meaning to it. In the consumer culture literature, the *Apple* brand is well studied and known as a very powerful and "cool" brand (Belk *et al.*, 2010). For example, Belk & Tumbat (2005) argue that consumers tend to buy *Apple* products in

order to demonstrate their anti-corporate capitalism positions. Also, they recognise and use Fournier's (1998) notion of intimacy which exists between individuals and brands when they are experiencing a brand relationship with the *Apple* brand. Also, the *Apple* brand is recognised by scholars as a brand which is at the centre of the very well researched concept of brand-community, or subculture of consumption. Schouten & McAlexander (1995) argue that such a subculture has the following characteristics that include:

'an identifiable, hierarchical social structure [based on status]; a unique ethos; ... and unique jargon, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression [to facilitate shared meanings in consumer goods and activities]' (p.43).

Therefore, the research here demonstrates that children are able to recognise symbols from the adult consumer world and use them in the same manner. Traditionally, research on children as consumers emphasises the very strong influence of peers on brand choices and, further, acceptance in popular groups and their relationships with brands (Ross & Harradine, 2004; Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). However, the research findings here clearly demonstrate that children's attitudes towards brands and brand-perceptions and use of brands for social purposes such as self-judgment and categorisation of others originated through the interaction with the adult world of consumption and its symbolic socially constructed meanings. Therefore, the research here is based on the CCT principles and provides evidence that children as consumers are irrational consumers and they engage with the symbolic brands at the personal and social levels. Therefore, the nature of this engagement is sophisticated and is related and explained through the sociology-cultural and ideological contexts of consumption.

In the research here, cool as a concept can be seen as a performance which requires validation by a relevant audience, meaning that social interaction, negotiation of meanings and, consequently, categorisation of people cannot be ignored. Having clarified the above, the research here acknowledges the Bourdieu (1984) contribution which addresses ideas of cultural dispositions, cultural capital, taste and habitus which provide a socio-cultural understanding of the consumption processes. More specifically, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of "taste" can be used in this research in order to explain the concept of cool and how this concept is used by children in order to categorise others. Bourdieu (1984, p.6) argues 'taste classifies and classifies the classifier'. However, it is important to acknowledge that Bourdieu (1984) rarely refers to children as consumers

and largely fails recognise children as a significant contributors to the processes of cultural dispositions (social objects – social subjects). This is consistent with the Cook (2008) argument in which he explains that children are missing in the well-developed consumption theories. Having clarified this, the research here argues that the concept of a cool brand can be linked to the concept of taste which is developed by Bourdieu (1984). In the research here, the cool brand is seen as children's symbolic expression of their distinction and belonging to the particular social group ("class" in the Bourdieu's (1984) terminology). Furthermore, the cool brand in the research here is used by children as a social marker in order to identify/socially categorise others. In line with the contributions of Bourdieu (1984) and Nairn *et al*. (2008), the research here acknowledges the importance of social interactions (socialisation) for children among themselves and also with the adult world (of which they are significant and inseparable part) for the brand symbolic meaning formation. In other words, through the socialisation processes children learn about resources which are provided by, what Bourdieu (1984) names, cultural capital. However, whilst Bourdieu's (1984) research focuses on social construction and consumption practice, the research here focuses on the importance and purposiveness which cool brands serve in children's lives and that is the creation of distinctions and the playing roles of social marker tools, rather than the explanation of what constitutes "cool" (social differentiations for Bourdieu).

The findings of this research support earlier research (Belk *et al*., 2010; Nairn *et al.*, 2008) and it is very evident that a cool brand is a highly socially negotiable phenomenon. The current study argues that cool brands as well as a non-cool brands are part of consumer culture and their role for an individuals' identity formation is well-acknowledged in the consumer culture literature. Belk *et al*. (2010) argue that the concept of cool is very similar to the well-known concept of cultural capital. Also, Nairn *et al.* (2008) use the concept of (good) "taste" in order to understand and interpret children's engagement with this concept. They further conclude that the concept of cool is a social category and it builds onto branded commodities. Consequently, the research here demonstrates that relationships with cool brands are very meaningful to children because they help them to define their sense of their individual identities (of being cool) and help them to obtain feelings of belonging to a specific social group through the judgments of others. Brands which are seen as cool brands by children in this research are the sources for their individual and social identity formation. The individual part of the identity is supported through the meaning and nature of the cool concept which

relates to status and differentiation from others. At the same time, social identity is supported because these brands provide children with the feelings of belonging. These ideas are consistent with research of Ross & Harradine (2004) who argue that children in the 9-11 years old category have quite high levels of brand awareness and brands help them to satisfy their needs of belonging. The research here, however, reveals that children use these brands at an earlier age than previously recognised.

5.4 Brands as supporters of socially constructed gender-identity

The gender-identity phenomenon as social construction and the brands' role in this phenomenon are well explored in CCT by Bakir & Palan (2010) and Thompson (1996). Knudsen & Kuever (2015), Russell & Tyler (2005) and Rodhain (2006) studied the phenomenon in the context of children. CCT proposes that brands do not have fixed meanings, they are dynamic and can be attached to the brands by consumers themselves (Elliot, 1993). Furthermore, Seabrook (1999, p. 104) opines that 'brands are how we figure out who we are'. The research here reveals that children use brands in order to support their gender-identities. It adopts the Fischer & Arnold (1994, 1990) view on gender identity and gender role attitudes. The aforementioned authors clarify that gender identity refers to the individuals' characteristics which are associated with the personality traits of femininity and masculinity. The gender role attitudes 'refers to beliefs about the roles (such as the breadwinner or child-care giver) appropriate for women and men' (Fischer & Arnold, 1994, p.166). Furthermore, Fischer & Arnold (1990, p.335) clarify that the gender role attitudes reflect 'traditional views on behaviours ... stereotypically allocated to each sex'. In CCT, marketing activities construct/shape gender roles and also inform consumer behaviour. Furthermore, consumers' self-conceptions can be understood through the processes of socialisation with the traditional beliefs and images associated with gender (Thompson, 1996; Fischer & Arnold, 1990). The findings of the research here address the suggestion of Bristor & Fischer (1993) who claim that deeper research on the gendered nature of consumption can enhance the understanding of consumer consumption practices and preferences. The research here provides evidence that children as consumers actively and purposely engage with the brands which hold gendered meanings for them. Significantly, these meanings are not created specifically by marketers for children (particularly boys) in order to achieve their commercial goal but rather children themselves identify a gendered nature of the brands and then use them in their lives.

Gender identity is a significant part of the self-concept and Grubb & Grathwohl (1967) argue that interaction with others is essential in order to form the individual concept. The research here reveals that gendered brands are used by children as tools in order to communicate desired information about themselves to their peers (opposite gender in this case) and then achieve a desired response from them. Therefore, the research here is in line with the ideas proposed by Grubb & Grathwohl (1967) who claim that brands/products are used by consumers as a reflection of their own identity (gender identity). Furthermore, the findings of the research here identify an interesting phenomenon in that children use certain brands to achieve their social goals of interpersonal attraction (creation of social relationships with their peers), where the gendered nature of brands becomes one of the key aspects of this phenomenon. The research here strongly reveals that the children perceive some brands as a symbols of masculinity/femininity. Furthermore, they use these gendered brands in different situations for their self-presentation. Consequently, the formation of children's social identity occurs and then the relationships with their peers takes place. Therefore, the research here argues that brands are sources of social knowledge for children. Interestingly, these findings can be connected to the fundamental ideas of Freud (1917, 1995) and Jung (1954) which are discussed in the Literature Review chapter.

Interestingly, the findings of the research here, to some extent, support the ideas of Rodhain (2006) in that brands could be seen as a gender-identification medium. Rodhain (2006, p. 551) argues that for boys (10-11 years old) brands (especially sportswear brands) are representors of male power and they use them in order to 'stand as boys in oppositions to girls'. Whereas girls (10-11 years old) have very little interest in such brands. Significantly, the findings of the research here reveal that this is applicable to children younger than 9 years old. The research here argues that the concept of gendered brands is linked to the idea of social knowledge which children gain from these brands. Furthermore, the research here reveals the formation of the symbolic meanings of brands for children (especially for boys) emerged in the social environment of home where the children's parents are the gender stereotypes for them. Therefore, gendered brands hold gendered meanings and provide stereotypes which, to some extent, gives social knowledge for children. The research here argues that children interpret meanings of the brands in their own unique ways, meaning children are active consumers and this is in alignment with the well-developed literature on the study of adults (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Fournier, 1998; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Holt, 1997).

Significantly, the fact that children are in child-parent relationships cannot be ignored. Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde (1987, p.222) argue that 'relationships affect and are affected by the social group in which they are embedded and the socio-cultural structure.' The latter refers to stereotypes, beliefs, institutions and other categories. Therefore, children's relationships with their parents and others affects their gender-identity formation and their understanding of the gender concept. Furthermore, the aforementioned could be related to the social cognitive theory or social constructionist model where individuals obtain knowledge and understanding of gender through the observational learning and behavioural imitation of adult's behaviour which aligns with the views of Freud (1917, 1995) and Jung (1954).

Then children use and practice the obtained knowledge in their daily lives and in different situations (James & James, 2008; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987). Traditionally, the social constructionist model suggests that parents/caregivers, through the socialisation process, role models, toys, games and others attributes/activities, teach children the feminine and/or masculine gender characteristics (James & James, 2008). Interestingly, the findings of the research here correlates with the described ideas above because, during the interviews, the children named such brands as Lacoste after-shave ("Dad's *Lacoste*"), *DKNY*, *Paco Rabane* and other perfumes which children perceived as brands for women and/or men because these brands are used by their parents. It is significant to note that parents do not necessarily introduce these brands to children as gender symbols/identifications. In other words, children learn about brand meanings and stereotypies passively as Liben & Bigler (2002) point out.

Scholars from social psychology argue that an individual's social knowledge is partly formed through the stereotypes which are learned through the socialisation processes, where parents are one of the main influencers (Crespi, 2004; Freud,1917, 1995; Jung,1954) In the marketplace, there are many brands which possess gender identities and this research reveals that children actively use brands as a gender stereotypes. Therefore, it is argued here that brands which parents are using are integrated into the process of gender stereotype formation and can be seen as contributors to the children's social knowledge of gender. This is in line with Mayer & Belk (1982, p.318) who claim that 'adults hold user stereotypes connected to clothing and other items', therefore, "the

other items" in the research here are brands. However, the focus of the research here is to understand the role of these symbolic brands in children's daily lives. It is revealed here that these brands support children's social identities and provide them with the feelings of attractiveness which further helps them to develop interactions with the opposite gender. In CCT, the gendered nature of brands and their social role in relation to children as consumers is acknowledged by Nairn *et al.* (2008). They propose that gender is one of the factors which is not an age-related factor and it can influence the way children interact with the symbolic side of consumption. Nairn *et al.* (2008) together with the analysis of the research findings here, identify a key general idea in relation to the child-gender-identity construction, brand symbolism and consumer culture. This idea is that the marketplace and brands with unique and distinct symbolic meanings are sources for children's identity construction and that children use these brands in order to negotiate and distinguish their gender identities. The research here correlates with the claims of Nairn *et al.* (2008). Furthermore, the children's sense of self is important in the context of gender-identification and the symbolic meanings of brands because these brands help children to reinforce the way they think about themselves. This correlates with the Levy (1959) classic ideas about the significance of the symbolic meanings of goods for consumers. It is clear that children gain social benefits from their relationships with the brands which have gender-meanings for them. Also, the findings of the research here supports the CCT idea that consumers, in this case children as consumers, 'actively rework symbolic meanings' of brands and then use them for their self-construction and self-presentation (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.871).

Interestingly, it is revealed in this research that children recognise brand personalities through their own unique interpretations and life situations. The concept of brand personality is central for the brand relationship theory according to Fournier (1998). Children in this research associate human personality traits with brands, for example *Lacoste* is strongly associated with masculinity. This association is directly informed through their parents (who typically use these brands) and the gender association they have with them. Consequently, it can be interpreted that, for example, the *Lacoste* brand holds a strong brand personality for children. This brand personality can be linked to the masculine/ruggedness dimension which is developed by Aaker (1997, p.354) and includes such facets as 'outdoorsy, masculine, Western, tough and rugged'. Interestingly, Aaker (1997) proposes that the sophistication and ruggedness dimensions

are different from the sincerity, excitement and competence dimensions. The difference lies in the idea that the latter are inborn parts of human personalities whereas the former refer to desirable human characteristics. This is linked to the idea that young boys desire to develop masculine characteristics, consequently, the symbolic use of brands is highly evidenced.

Whilst this research is driven by the principles of New Sociology, the fundamental ideas of developmental phycology are also considered. Section 2.10.2a of the Literature Review discusses the contributions of Freud (1917, 1995) and Jung (1954). The findings of this research correlate with Freud's "psychosexual latency stage (6 – 11 years old)" to some degree, in which children are adopting appropriate gender roles and developing social relationships. Jung (1954) recognises the important role of parents in the psychological development of the child. The important role of the parents in the children's gender development is evidenced in this research as children imitate their parent's behaviour and associated brand preferences.

Moreover, the research here further proposes that the ideas of gender identity construction and brand symbolism can be linked to the interpersonal desires for attraction to others. Consequently, it can be argued that meaningful child brand relationships are constituted. More specifically, the research here proposes that children's motivation for interpersonal attraction is a driver for the engagement, use and relationship formation with gender-orientated brands. This notion correlates with the Ji's (2008) similar research. She proposes that there are two types of motivation which are needed for the child to develop a relationship with a brand. These are self-concept development and intimacy. She also claims that some of the product categories could be more relevant to the child's central self than others and this could affect the brand relationships formation. Significantly, she bases her claims on the principles of developmentalism and is seeking to identify the facts, characteristics and details of the brand child relationship formations. This is a very different objective from the aim of the research here which seeks to understand the role of brands in children's daily lives from the CCT perspective. At the same time, Ji (2008) claims that gender is central to children's self-concept and assumes that girls might chose the *Barbie* doll brand (for example) as a relevant, gender stereotypical product. However, she does not explain what kind of emotional or social benefits a child would gain from these relationships. Whereas, the findings of the research here clearly identify children's desires to form

relationships with the opposite gender which provides them with emotional satisfaction. Therefore, it is argued here that brands and their symbolic meanings are one of the sources of social knowledge used by children in order to satisfy their social and individual self-needs, in other words, some brands are a sources of gender knowledge.

5.5 Brands as supporters of children's social status – the liminal stage

Analysis of the data here reveals that child brand relationships exist in the context of children's transition from childhood to adulthood and the teenage period in between. It is important to start the discussion of this section by providing a clear explanation of how childhood is defined and positioned in this research. First, the research here adopts the notion from Aries (1962) that childhood is a social construction. Furthermore, children in this research have the status of active social agents which is in keeping with the position taken by Russell & Tyler (2005) which emphasises that children have their own subjective understanding of their child or adult position. Therefore, childhood is also constructed by children themselves. Consequently, the research here has been undertaken using the assumption that children themselves are very well aware when they themselves subjectively begin to transition from one social status to another. This is adapted from the Russell & Tyler (2005) research in which they propose the "doing childhood" view on children. Furthermore, they clarify this view in terms of taking the position that it:

> '… seeks to privilege children's knowledge of the world they inhabit while also emphasizing the need, as in the case of adult ''doing'' to place that existence within its broader social context' (Russell & Tyler, 2005, p.227).

The research here argues that brands are significant in children's lives and help them to position themselves in the social context and also act to support their social status. The children are seen in this research as participants who are competent and have their own voices and opinions. Consequently, the research here identifies that children are well aware that childhood is a temporary period for them and that the older they get, the closer to adulthood they become. Therefore, the research here supports the view of Cook (2010) and also Cody (2012) who argues that the:

> '… notion that a more discerning perspective can be gained by viewing children as not so much socialized into becoming one kind of specific consumer as they

are seen entering into social relationships with and through goods and their associations' (Cody, 2012 p.43).

Furthermore, this research also applies and supports Cody's (2012) and Buckingham's (2000) suggestion that children's own engagement with the social context and consumption and thus consumer culture, could provide a better understanding of the children as consumers concept and greater understanding of their relationships with brands. The research here proposes that the brand relationship theory can be advanced to acknowledge the theory of liminality and viewing children as being in the "here and now" rather than "becoming". Cody (2012) seeks to explore children's consumption practice by applying the theory of liminality and views children as 'engaged and embedded in diverse environments but also as mobile actors confronting different social settings' (James & Prout, 1996, p.49). Cody (2012, p.61) develops the concept of liminal consumption as:

> 'a theoretical understanding of those who exist and consume mid-way along a threshold of suspended identities, belonging to neither the child nor teen sphere but concurrently embedded in both'.

The findings of the research here are in line with the contribution of Cody (2012) and also identifies children's mid-way position between childhood and adulthood, however, in the research here, the participating children were younger than 11 years of age and of both genders. Cody (2012) emphasises that children are lacking sociocultural categorisation and that they experience invisibility and frustration and, at the same time, she highlights different consumption practices which emerged as a result of this disadvantage. The research here perceives Cody's findings as a good starting point for the further development of the child brand relationships concept. However, the research here has not identified the elements of children's frustration in relation to their social self-identity as Cody found. To clarify, the interviewed children understood clearly their social positions as children and quite clearly emphasised their readiness and willingness to move from childhood to adulthood. Children revealed that their transit could be supported by certain brands which they associate with adulthood and not childhood. Furthermore, not only brands and their symbolic meanings contribute to the children's transition but also product clothing characteristics (such as adult sizes) are also contributing to the their perception of moving from childhood to adulthood. Consequently, this contributes to the ideas of Piacentini (2010), Cook (2004) and Rose

et al. (1998). These authors claim that clothing is a visible social tool used by children to communicate their identities to others.

The symbolic meanings of brands is central to the understanding of children's brand relationships. Elliot & Wattanasuwans (1988) explain that individuals use the symbolic meanings of brands/products to emphasise their affiliation and/or belonging to different social groups and this is applicable to children as consumers as well as adults, according to the research findings here. Amongst all the interviewed children the *Topshop* and *Primark* brands came across as brands with distinctive symbolic meanings which children are using in their lives in order to position themselves in the social context. Frequently, children clearly expressed the rejection of the *Primark* brand arguing that it is too "babyish" and this correlates with the idea provided by Banister & Hogg (2004). They argue that the understanding of negative symbolic consumption and consumer's rejection of certain products are important for marketers. Furthermore, they explain that consumers tend to reject certain products in order to support/maintain and protect their self-esteem which consequently contributes to their self-construction and helps them to get closer to their ideal self. Therefore, it is argued here that this is applicable to children as well as adults as revealed in the research here. More specifically, this research reveals that children reject those brands which are not congruent with their individual perceptions of their social status.

Importantly, the research of Banister & Hogg (2004) specifically focuses on the style of clothing, however they admit that some of their research participants referred to specific brands. Therefore, there is some consistency between the research here and the research of Banister & Hogg (2004) and it is argued here that brands and the understanding of their symbolism could provide a better understanding of children as consumers in relation to their brands. Furthermore, the research here illustrates that children harbour a desire to change their social status of children and obtain the status of adults. The rejection of the *Primark* brand could be explained through the association of it with childhood and the children's readiness to move to the next stage of social standing where the brand of *Topshop*, children believe, will help them with this transition. It is evident that this brand signifies adulthood to children and possession of it helps them to create their desirable image of themselves. In other words, the *Topshop* brand could, they believe, help them to be who they want to be. This idea echoes with the research of Belk (1988) and Richins (1994) who note that consumers use brands in order to

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communicate their desired impressions. Also, the findings of this research support another interesting idea from consumer research. That is that consumers do not always perceive images of brands in direct ways planned by marketers (Holt, 2002). Based on this notion, Marion & Nairn (2011) conducted their research in which they sought to understand how teenage girls use the fashion discourse in order to construct their identities. They argue that 'teenage girls use the fashion discourse to construct their evolving identity from their recently left childhood to their future as fully-grown women' (Marion & Nairn, 2011, p.29). This idea correlates with the findings of the research here, however the way in which this research has been conducted is different because Marion & Nairn (2011) use a bricolage methodology.

The research here provides evidence that children have very strong and meaningful associations with such brands as *Primark* and *Topshop*. These associations, it can be assumed, are formed in the children's own world meaning that children are active in meaning-creations and further use these meanings for their own purposes. This correlates with McCraken's (1986) dynamic meaning transfer model and also with Marion & Nairn's (2011) view on child-consumption.

The aim of the research here is to explore children's relationships with brands and, in order to do so, the understanding of the meanings which are attached to brands by children has to be gained. Consequently, this research reveals that the meaning that children attach to the *Primark* brand is that of childhood whereas the *Topshop* brand holds the meaning of adulthood to them. Furthermore, it is clear that these brands bring emotional values to children and help them to gain support for their desired selves. Consequently, children obtain a new (for them) position in society. It is argued here that children do have very meaningful and purposive connections with these particular brands and this correlates with the main principles of the brand relationship theory developed by Fournier (1998).

5.6 Children's fantasy worlds and their brands

The current study posits that media is integrated into the worlds of children and they cannot be isolated from it. Children engage with the different information streams which are delivered to them through films, video games, clothing and other commercial products and activities. Jenkins *et al.* (2006) refer to the "transmedia technique" where

brands are seen as communication tools which provide consumers with the story. The research here identifies superhero brands as significant contributors to children's daily lives. The findings chapter reveals that children create fantasy worlds through their superhero brands. These brands have very distinctive identities and stories to which children are able to connect.

Scholars who study digital culture and individuals who engage with these "fictional worlds/big worlds" as they refer to them, do so by reading, playing and viewing them (Wohlwend, 2015). The research here claims that these are worlds in which children's play activities take part and that these worlds are extended by children beyond the original story/text/message. Interestingly, Mackey (2009) argues that there are different formats of these worlds and they are created through the different information providers: books; computer games; television shows; toys and other elements of popular culture. Moreover, she argues that contemporary popular culture encourages the formation of "big worlds". Interestingly, she further explains that, in order to return to a fictional world, a child should re-read, re-watch or re-play. In the research here this idea is linked to the pretend play activity which will be fully explained later in this section. Furthermore, the research here proposes that the superhero brands are part of the children's current popular culture. Additionally, children possess the superhero costumes and then, through play activities, place themselves in the world of fantasies or as Wohlwend (2015, 2011) names them, "big worlds". The research here supports the idea formulated by Wohlwend (2015, p.549) and that is 'that play performance of popular media characters allows children to try on pretend-identities and mediate imagined worlds'. For the research here, the idea provided by Wohlwend (2015), whose main focus was to investigate the nature of children's play and creativity, is a valuable point which helps us to understand better children's connections with this type of brands.

The creation of fantasy worlds occurs through pretend play and the role of pretend games is also not to be overlooked. The importance of pretend play in children's lives for their healthy emotional development is well acknowledged by scholars studying children's psychology, sociology, developmentalism, education and other orientations (Wohlwend, 2015; Dilalla & Watson, 1988; Furth, 1996). The research here proposes that these superhero brands support children's pretend play, therefore, children's connections with these brands are both meaningful and purposive.

This research proposes that actions of play (interaction) can be seen as a lived experience/interaction with the brands which is essential for the formation of brand relationships. Therefore, this is consistent with the notion provided by Fournier (1998, p.344) who argues that: 'consumer brand relationships are valid at the level of lived experience'. Also, the initial idea of brand relationships is based on the idea that interaction is important because, through interaction, the exchange of resources is taking place and the relationships are forming (Huang, 2012; Fournier, 1998; Hinde, 1995). Also, Ji (2002) bases her research on the concepts of Fournier and argues that children do have relationships with brands if there is some sort of experience with brands which they can memorise and recall. The research here concurs with Ji's idea to some extent, however, the key here is to understand if children do have relationships with superhero brands and then ascertain how these relationships bring benefits and values to their lives.

Interestingly, Furth (1996) argues that, from the children's point of view, these games are a source of fun. The research findings here are consistent with Furth's (1996) position and claims that children do have relationships with superhero brands. The research here further argues that children create fantasy worlds through play activities. These fantasy worlds provide children with the opportunity to experience different emotions, social roles and relationships with peers and, consequently, better understand the world around them. Furthermore, analysis of the findings clearly reveals that these superhero brands are the sources of fantasy based human traits which children tend to incorporate into their pretend play, and consequently, fulfil their fantasy worlds. Interestingly, developmental psychologists explain the motivation for such play activities using the assumption that children live under the continuous pressure of the restriction placed on them by adults and fantasy play helps them to cope with this pressure (Canning, 2007). This research supports this idea and argues that children, through pretend play, obtain some degree of power and control over their own lives by adopting their superhero's "unreal" human characteristics (different powers) in their pretend play activities. The ideas explained above also support the Parson & Howe (2013) research in which they claim that pretend play gives children opportunity to practice their strengths and competences.

The brand relationships theory, it should be noted, is strongly based on the concept of brand personality (Fournier, 1998; 2009). It is very clear that each superhero brand has a very distinct brand personality which has been formed mainly by the marketers' efforts. These "personalities" hold not only fantasy based human traits, but also human personality traits. Hence, boys tend to choose superheroes which very clearly represent masculinity (for example *Spiderman*) and girls prefer feministic characters (for example *Elsa*). Therefore, it is possible that superhero brands can be positioned across Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions and facets. For example, *Spiderman* can be aligned with "ruggedness" and *Elsa* with "sophistication" and/or "competence".

The ideas above already demonstrate that children purposively engage with these brands in order to sustain their selves and make their daily lives more fulfilling and interesting, meaning children do have connections with these brands. Furthermore, as explained in sections 2.8 and 5.2, the contribution of Huang & Mitchel (2014), Reimann *et al.* (2012) and Aron *et al.* (1995) relating to self-expansion theory, is also relevant in the context of this section. These authors discuss the concept of self-expansion theory which is used in consumer behaviour research and helps us better understand the brand relationship theory. This research reveals that children expand their selves through the incorporation of fantasy and the human traits of superhero brands.

The research here is built on the principles of New Sociology where children's lives are seen in the here and now. Also, children are seen as constructors of their own childhood and that they are able to act independently (to some degree) from adults and they are accepting of the power of their parents/ caregivers. In this case, the creation of the fantasy worlds is seen as acts of children's creativity and desires to enjoy life. The research here proposes that the concept of positive emotion could be used in order to explain the connection between children and these brands. Interestingly, Illouz (2009) very strongly argues the use of the category of emotion in place of that of desires in order to explore consumer culture behaviour. Furthermore, she proposes the interesting idea that consumers experience real emotions in imaginary mode/fantasy worlds. In other words, she argues that emotions are results of imagination which is triggered by marketers through the different marketing communication strategies. The research here agrees with Illouz (2009) and further argues that children not only pretend that they can fly or run faster because they obtain the costumes, but also that they have a very strong belief that they can actually achieve that super performance in the real world.

Furthermore, the research here argues that children's imagination is the link between emotions which they receive from the brands and consumption. This again supports the contribution of Illouz (2009) who claims that the phenomenon of imagination is the conceptual link between emotion and consumption. Also, she refers to such terms as fictional imagination or un-asserted beliefs which generate different emotions. She clarifies that consumers obtain emotions through the consumption process knowing that certain things are not real (for example: 'I cry at the end of Anna Karenina, even if I know she has never existed' (Illouz, 2009, p.400). Also, she claims that fictional emotions are continuous and contiguous with real-life. Her research and suggestions, together with the findings of the research here, bring value to the understanding of the children's relationships with superhero brands. Therefore, the research here argues that these brands can be seen as bridges between real and fantasy worlds. Consequently, children gain the strong emotions of happiness and self-confidence because of these superheroes brands and pretend play, meaning there are connections between children and their superheroes brands.

5.7 Brands and social embeddedness

The research here identifies the fact that children's connections with brands is better understood through careful understanding of their relationships with their close relatives, such as parents/caregivers. This research argues that brands/objects are deeply embedded in the relationships children have with their parents/caregivers. This addresses the recommendations of Ji (2002) and Martens *et al.* (2004) that marketers should pay close attention to the children's social environment which includes parents/caregivers, siblings, relatives, peers and media because children's brand relationships are influenced by, and embedded in, the social environment.

Firstly, the research here identifies that those children who have brands which are embedded in their relationships with parents/caregivers have a high level of brand knowledge possibly attained through ZPD. The role of parents/ caregivers is also recognised in Vygotski's (1978) work on ZPD which is discussed in section 2.10.2a. This supports the claim of Bravo *et al.* (2007) that the family is a very influential factor in consumer behaviour which stimulates high levels of brand knowledge because the family introduces them to a variety of different brands. Also, Ji (2002) identifies that children admire some car brands which have been used by their grandparents and

parents. She further claims that children's brand preferences are based on the brands which have been used by different family members. The research here concurs with Ji (2002) because the research here reveals that children's brand preferences are strongly affected by the brand choices which the parent/caregivers possess, however, the research here views the proposal of Ji (2002) critically because, although she aimed to explore children's relationships with brands, she did not clarify the importance of these brands in the daily lives of children.

Secondly, and not less importantly is to understand here how these social relationships and brand relationships connect to each other at the conceptual level, and what kind of value/benefits children gain in the context of the embeddedness of their relationships with brands in their social environment. The social nature of brands needs to be acknowledged in relation to the children's brand preferences which are based on brands which have been used by their parents. Rodhain & Aurier (2016) argue that only a very few studies have tried to understand children's relationships with brands in the social context where different socialisation agents are acknowledged. In their research, the focus is on the school context and peers. In general, they conclude that the children's brand relationship concept is very dynamic and highly social in its nature. Also, they emphasise the role of social interaction for constructing such relationships. The research here agrees that social interaction is also important for the formation of the child brand relationships which are embedded into children's relationships with parents/caregivers. The importance of communication/social interactions for families' lives is also acknowledged by Epp & Price (2008, p.53) who argue that 'brands and services are embedded in communication forms and inserted into family life to build and manage identity bundles'. Consequently, the research here argues that the child-parent interaction uncovers the nature of children's connections with brands. Also, it has to be acknowledged that Ji's (2002) assumption that children form relationships with brands if they are able to store interaction with them in their memories could be further extended.

The research here proposes that children should store meaningful interactions with their parents and their brands and life activities which then will embed these brands into relationships which children have with their parents/caregivers. In other words, brands are part of the child-parent/caregiver interaction in which, in some cases, children recognise and acknowledge their parents'/caregivers' lived experiences with brands.

Therefore, the very strong social role of brands is evident and this is consistent with the research by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) and Cova & Cova (2002) who develop the concept of brand community. They argue that consumers feel a connection to the brand but the connection towards people is more important and this is what this research argues in relation to children as consumers and the relationships they have with their parents/care givers.

5.8 Brands and social affiliation

The research here reveals that, for children, the *Kickers* and *Clarks* footwear brands hold strong social meanings. Children associate these brands with the school environment and only use them as symbols of affiliation and belonging to this specific environment. This supports Elliot & Wattanasuwan's (1988) classic idea that consumers' choices/preferences are not only based on the utilitarian aspects of the product. Therefore, children in the research here value these particular brands for their social meanings and feelings of belongings which these brands are providing. Furthermore, the contiguity of consumption and social worlds of children is evidenced in this research because children use commercial brands as sources for their shared identities. This echoes with the ideas of Kates (2002, p.385) in that 'consumption is a critical site in which identities, boundaries and shared meanings are forged'. Kates (2002) also argues that consumers, through the goods, are able to express their affiliation to a particular subculture. Relevantly, in the research here, it is clear that children use some brands in order to express their belongingness to their schools. Whilst school is one of the most important social contexts for children, where they socialise, learn, build inter-personal relationships and sustain their identities, it is also an organisation which has a distinctive brand. The complex nature of a brand is explored in section 2.5 in which social, symbolic, socio-cultural aspects of a brand are considered. The classic definition of a brand which has been formulated by the American Marketing Association is: 'a name, term, sign, symbol or design or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors' (Ama.org, 2018). Regardless of the fact that all schools essentially serve the same purpose (education) in the lives of children, they hold most of the attributes of a commercial brand in that they have their unique names, symbols (uniforms, colours and emblems), logos, values and other

characteristics. Moreover, just like commercial brands the school as a brand provides an opportunity for socialisation and provides a sense of belonging.

Thompson & Haytko (1997) argue that consumers could use fashion brand meanings in order to foster their sense of social belonging and affiliation with others. The authors clarify that consumers interpretive uses of the fashion discourse creates emergent meanings that reflect a dialogue between their personal goals, life history, context-specific interest' (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p.16). The research here supports the argument of Thompson & Haytko (1997) in that the *Kickers* and *Clarks* brands are identified as symbolic bands which are part of the fashion discourse and symbols of the school environment. Furthermore, these brands are used by children in the very specific context of school, where approval of these brands by other pupils is significant for the child's self-identity formation. The children were emphatic that they would not wear these brands outside the school environment. This point also supports the claim of Thompson & Haytko (1997) that self-identity is a dynamic phenomenon because individuals always contrast their selves with others and define and re-define themselves in the context of different social relations.

In this research, the school is positioned as one of the social settings where children's daily lived experiences occur. The school as a social place, provides children with social norms, values and symbols which forge children's social identities of being a school-child. Mayall (1994) acknowledges that children are able to modify and influence the social environment around them. Furthermore, the way adults view, perceive and construct children/childhood in different social settings should be recognised. The rules which schools provide to children is a reflection of the authority which adults have over the children and a reflection of the adults' understanding of what childhood is. The findings of the research here demonstrate that children recognise and accept the school's symbols such as uniform, however it is also evident that they have their own symbolic meanings in the shape of commercial brands which can be seen as a part of the children's own symbolic system. This strongly supports the position of children in this research which is proposed by Corsaro (2005), Cook (2004, 2005), Nairn *et al.* (2008). The position is that children are active participants in society, that they are creative and able to create their own unique peer culture. It is clear that these brands (*Kickers* and *Clarks*) provide children with the sense of belonging to the school environment and provide a connection to their peers. It is clear in this research that the

Kickers and *Clarks* brands are sources of linking-values for children. The idea of linking-values has been introduced by Cova (1997) and developed further by Cova & Cova (2002) where the authors explain characteristics of tribal marketing. This concept is based on the idea of individualism and consumers' tendencies to gain freedom from the constructed collective models. Furthermore, Cova & Cova (2002) opine that individuals' behaviour is more strongly influenced by social groupings (tribes) than by formal modern authorities.

The research here proposes that, based on the notion of Cova & Cova (2002), schools provide children with the sense of belonging to the school community, however children do not engage with this community in a straightforward way. Even though the school is a facilitator of the community itself, the children are the central contributors of this community. It is recognised here that there are some elements of tribalism within the school community. These elements are (1) children in school are heterogeneous individuals, (2) in school, children are involved in collective actions and they share experience of reality and emotions which are facilitated by the identified brands, and (3) the school tribe is not commercial for children and children mostly value the connections with each other rather the brands themselves. Therefore, the role of brands in children's lives in the social context of school is to provide them with the feelings of affiliation, connection to the school community and feelings of collectiveness. Cova & Cova (2002, p.603) argue that 'tribal interrelations exert pressure on members to remain to the collective and consequently to the brand'. Furthermore, an interesting and relevant idea to the research here, is developed by Thompson (2004), who argues:

> '… rather than just being a symbolic resource for the construction of personal identity, communal brands are a foundation of group identification and experiences of social solidarity' (p.98).

This idea is supported by Aledin (2012) who identifies the fact that some brands play the role of social filters for some children. The author here claims that some brands provide teenagers with the status which can be described as "normal", "standard and normal teenager" and others. Furthermore, Aledin (2012) clarifies that brands provide children with the feelings of security which helps them to fit in. The findings of the research here are consistent with the notions of Thompson (2004) and Aledin (20012). Children in this study use the *Kickers* and *Clarks* brands because these are the correct (for them) brands for school environment. The common feeling across all children can

be expressed in terms of "… you sort of can't go wrong when you are wearing them" (P22, girl, aged 8). These brands are important in children's daily lives because they provide them with the feeling of acceptance by others, not to stand out and (other children in school) "like them" underlining their acceptance. The latter point also correlates with the idea of Auty & Elliot (2001) who argue that social approval for adolescent consumers is more important than expression of identification with the specific group. However, the authors further argue that 'apparently, the simplest way to gain approval is to be like the people one chooses to be liked by' (Auty & Elliot, 2001, p.327).

The findings here demonstrate that children's individual and social self-identity formation is supported by the *Kickers* and *Clarks* brands in the social context of the school environment and it was revealed that the formation of both types of identities (individual and social) appears in a parallel manner. This is in line with Elliott (1998) who records:

> 'the development of individual self-identity is inseparable from the parallel development of collective social identity' and 'self-identity must be validated through social interaction' (p.19).

Therefore, children form brand relationships in the social context of school for the purposes of social affiliation and formation of both social and individual self-identities.

5.9 Brands buttressing children's life-projects

The findings of this research reveal that brands are a significant part of children's everyday lives, especially in the context of their hobbies and interests. More specifically, children's relationships with brands assists them in their life-projects. The findings here explain that children associate certain brands with their hobbies and interests and they use these brands for their self-identity construction. For example, for girls who define themselves as dancers, the brands of *Pineapple, Capezio* and *Bloch* are very important. This is consistent with Fournier's (2009) notion regarding the purposiveness nature of brand relationships and consumers' active roles of meaning-makers where they adapt marketers' brand meanings into their specific life-projects. Mick & Buhl (1992) studied individuals' life-projects and life-themes in relation to the

consumers' interpretation of advertisements. They clarify that life-projects and life-themes:

'… provide a linkage between the uniquely and individual and sociocultural aspects of human behaviour, and between motivation and cognition in concrete experiential events, including advertising processing' (p.333).

Their study develops a meaning-based model which demonstrates that consumer's interpretation of meanings is shaped and affected by the individual's life-themes and -projects, where life-projects are establishing life-themes. This model is used in order to understand children's connections with their brands. In this research, children's hobbies and interests are identified as their life-projects, for example dancing and football fans. Furthermore, it is identified that brands are part of children's life-projects and these life-projects take place within the social sphere which includes family and peers. Consequently, these life-projects also reflect children's desires for interactions with their peers, family and friends. All the aforementioned contribute to the way children interpret and attach meanings of/to the brands and then use them in their daily lives. Significantly, the research here proposes that the brands' symbolic meanings emerge within the children's culture and these meanings reflect certain hobbies/interests which are clearly understood by all children who are engaged with the various activities. This correlates with the view of McCracken (1986) in that meanings are culturally constituted by members of the specific group and then moved to the goods, in the context of this research, to the brands. Children do not only associate brands with a specific hobby or interest, but also use them as a symbolic source for self-definition and supporters for the relationships and socialisation activities with others. Both of these notions are supported by the contributions of Belk (1988) and Fournier (2009; 1998). First, Belk's (1988) idea of the extended self is clearly reflected in the findings of the research here in that children in this research use certain brands as tangible evidence of their hobbies or interests and, consequently, their extended selves. Furthermore, they use them in order to define themselves as supporters of their life-projects, where the actual lived experience with the brand is significant in order to sustain their extended sense of self. Belk (1988, p.145) explains that 'having possessions can contribute to our capabilities for doing and being' and this is reflected in the findings of the research here. For example, for girls their dancing brands are the tools for being a dancer and boys are able to be football fans though brand extensions of football clubs. Additionally, the actual participation or practice in the activity is an essential part for

the maintenance of the self-definition and development of brand relationships. Therefore, children's life-projects and their relationships with specific brands contributes to each other and this notion is in line with the contribution of Fournier (1998) in that the 'projects, concerns, and themes that people use to define themselves can be played out in the cultivation of brand relationships … those relationships, in turn, can affect the cultivation of one's concept of self' (p.359).

Therefore, it is evident that, in the research here, these brands contribute significantly to the children's identity formation and support their sense of self. It is important to clarify here that the majority of children interviewed have social environments (school, home and past times) which are frequently limited and include peers/friends and family members. These agents are often studied by consumer researchers as key factors which influence the child consumer socialisation process. For example, the most relevant research in relation to children and their brands in the context of socialisation agents is undertaken by Ji (2002), Nairn *at al.* (2008) and Rodhain & Aurier (2016). Additionally, the research here supports the idea of Belk (1988) and Fournier (1998, 2009) in that it is important to gain a holistic view of consumer's lives in order to understand their meaningful connections with brands. Therefore, it is clear in this research that since children have limited social spheres in which they engage with each other and with other social agents, these spheres become central to their lives and their importance for them should not be underestimated. Consequently, the value and importance of brands and relationships with these brands which support children's life-projects is strongly evidenced in the research here. Also, brands in the context of children's life-projects help them to maintain their relationships with their family members and peers, especially if they share a specific interest or life-project (hobby). For example, the whole family is a supporter of a particular football club, therefore the brand role here, it is evident, is that of a mediator for the family relations. This is related to the theme 7, where Brands as an Embedded Category is discussed. Furthermore, the brands which are involved in children's life-projects are also enablers of friendship networks between children who share the same hobbies and interests. This is consistent with Aledin's (2012) idea that teenagers have a "match maker" type of relationships with brands. Therefore, brand relationships in this context connects groups of friends and provides them with the feeling of togetherness and further, they enable children to communicate and socialise with each other.

This section of this chapter reveals that brands are significant contributors to the children's life-projects. Children form relationships with brands and they help them to make sense of their social reality, define themselves in relation to the context and connect them to the different social agents.

5.10 Brands as leisure resources

This section of the discussion chapter addresses Fournier's (2009) point:

'Academics and managers alike fall into the trap of assuming that brand relationships are all about identity expression … but, they (brand relationships) can also address functions lower on the need hierarchy by delivering against very pragmatic current concerns' (p.5).

The above can be used to explain the functional and experiential benefits which children gain from having relationships with brands such as *X-box*, *Converse*, *British Knights*, *Nike* and *Addidas*. Also, as the aim of this research is to understand the role of brands in children's daily lives, it is important to acknowledge that the research here identifies that leisure and entertainment are key desires for children in their lives and especially, in home environment.

Relevantly, Nairn *et al*. (2008) argue that children derive major benefits from brands as a source of entertainment and fun. The findings of the research here are consistent with the point made by Nairn e*t al.* (2008) because the findings here clearly reveal that entertainment is one of the drivers for children's engagement with the brands. It is evident that the children receive both utilitarian and emotional values from these relationships. Additionally, the research here identifies interesting additional aspects of the brand relationships for the purpose of entertainment. These are (1) the importance of the context of the home environment, (2) children's particular perceptions of brands at home as a major source of entertainment and (3), their belief that the purpose of these brands in their lives is to provide a source of entertainment and fun. Also, it was strongly evidenced that children value the utilitarian characteristics of their brands because they demonstrate high levels of knowledge and interest of the product features. Therefore, on one hand this research identifies a high level of brand awareness and brand knowledge among children aged between 5 and 9 years, which is consistent with the research of Valkenburg & Buijzen (2005), Ross & Harradine (2004) and

Achereiner & John (2003). On the other hand, for the purposes of the research here, it is more important to acknowledge that these brands bring joy and happiness to the lives of children and this is what they desire and value the most in their home environments. Also, Ashworth, Dacin & Thomson (2009) clarify that consumers can have a relationship with brands without developing strong feelings towards them and this is what the research here shows. Brands provide both functional and experiential/emotional benefits to children and this what is important to them, therefore, children's relationships exist, they are meaningful in their lives and children derive benefits from them.

Interestingly, this section demonstrates that children perceive birthday and Christmas as highly commercialised events which provide opportunities to children to receive their desired brands. The phenomena of birthday and Christmas are fully discussed in the Literature Review (Section 2.16).

Summary

Children live in the digital age and they connect to it through positive relationships that they have with technological brands. These also provide them with feelings of competency which is explained using the concepts of self-esteem. The efficacy dimension is used in this research in order to understand the benefits children gain from relationships with these technological brands. Furthermore, the relationships with fashion brands and cartoon brands are contributing significantly to the identities of children and their social lives. These relationships help children to complete their self-concepts and achieve desired positions in society (popularity). The concept of cool is discussed and the symbolic roles of brands for social categorisation is identified. Next, children's relationships with gendered brands are identified in which brands and their gendered symbolic meanings are valuable sources of social knowledge to them. Children, it is established, have meaningful relationships with the *Primark* and *Topshop* brands which help them to transition from childhood to adulthood and support their desired selves. Relationships with superhero brands allows children to create fantasy worlds and provides them with some degree of control over their lives. It was identified that brands are embedded in children's social relationships and here the relationship with the brand served to enhance or support the social relationships which children had with their parents/caregivers. Children form relationships with brands for the purposes

of social affiliation in the context of the school environment and these relationships contribute to the social and individual children's self-identities. Relationships with brands helps children to define themselves in relation to the context of their life-projects. Finally, children have relationships with brands which provide functional and experiential/ emotional benefits in the home environment which provides them with happiness and joy.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Overview

This chapter will present how this research contributes to the body of knowledge on consumer brand relationships. In order to do this, it applies the principles of CCT and the New Sociology of Childhood. Consequently, the children are given autonomy, in other words, children's own voices and opinions about their brands are used to learn how these brands contribute to their daily lives and their identities. This chapter is the conclusion to the study. It provides a research overview, explains the origin of the research idea, provides justification for the research and presents the research questions and objectives. It also provides highlights of the key research findings, its contribution to knowledge, discusses the research limitations, suggests implications for managers, and ends with the recommendations for future research.

6.1 Research overview

The aim of this research is to identify the different roles that brands play in children's lives. In order to achieve this from the CCT perspective, this research begins with an exploration of the CCT research stream and its linkage to brand relationship theory. Significantly, both CCT and brand relationship theory are orientated towards exploration of consumer identity projects where consumers are seen as active participants, creators and users of the consumption world. Furthermore, the importance of consumer culture and brands as sources of symbolic meanings which consumers use for the creation of their selves is emphasised. Next, the Literature Review chapter identifies the gap in the literature which this research fills and that is that children as consumers have been neglected in existing consumer culture research and their own engagement with the consumption world is not fully investigated (Cody, 2012; Cook 2008, 2010; Nairn *et al.,* 2008; Martens *et al.,* 2004). Also, evidence that scholars primarily use the developmental model in order to study children and explore how they develop as consumers is provided. Furthermore, the highly significant point raised by Nairn *et al.* (2008) is addressed. They identify that the CCT approach to study children as consumers is valuable for improving our understanding of the children as consumers phenomenon and the role of brands in their lives. They strongly believe that the Piagetian model, which is widely used by marketers, is limited and does not incorporate, for example, such significant aspects as gender differences, symbolic

interpretation and social and cultural influences. Furthermore, in order to support and elaborate upon the Nairn *et al.* (2008) suggestion of using the CCT approach to study children's relationships with brands, the Literature Review provides a critical evaluation of children's position in scientific research, more specifically in the areas of psychology and sociology. This is a logical and rational step because marketers frequently rely on the theories from these research disciplines. For example, Fournier's (1998) theory of brand relationships (which is central in this research) is based on the principles of social relationships. Consequently, the contribution of Corsaro (2005) is identified as key in order to understand how research on children has been changing over time. Therefore, the main idea for this research is that research on children has developed from studying them through the Piagetian cognitive development concepts and principles of socialisation towards the framework in which they are seen in a less linear way and more as active social beings who create their own peer worlds and their own identities (Cook, 2008; Corsaro, 2005).

The Literature Review provides better understanding of why the CCT approach is valuable and suitable to study children and their brands. The CCT approach allows understanding of the role that brands play in the formation of children's identities in their lives from their own perspectives. Consequently, both the CCT approach and the ideas of New Sociology support the idea of children being active consumers. Furthermore, the Literature Review provides strong evidence of children's neglected position in consumer culture research and introduces the idea of "commercial enculturation" provided by Cook (2010) which he sees as an alternative to the concept of consumer socialisation. His idea links with contributions from Corsaro (2005) and Nairn *et al.* (2008) which shows that children are knowing, active and contributing members of society and of the commercial world.

Furthermore, the definition and nature of the brand phenomenon is explored which is a significant step in this research because it helps to better understand the concept of children's brand relationships and provides an extended understanding of brands in the context of children as consumers. The later sections of Literature Review provide a deep investigation into the brand relationship theory and its roots and presents the most recent studies of the concept and discusses the importance of brands for consumers' identities. Furthermore, the Literature Review explains the role of brands for the creation of the self-concept where the categories of self-image, self-presentation, self-

esteem and extended-self are clarified and explained. Significantly, this literature observation was essential in order to better explore the nature of child-brand connections. Consequently, and finally, the Literature Review carefully explores and reviews the concept of children's identity projects in the context of consumer culture research and existing ideas of children's relationships with brands. Significantly, it was identified that there are very few academic papers which address and investigate children's brand relationships. The few include for example, Ji (2008, 2006) and Rodhain (2016). Furthermore, it was very important to consider these contributions at a very detailed level in order to provide a further contribution to the overall concept of children's brands relationships. Consequently, it was identified that these papers, and existing literature on children as consumers in general, are primarily based on the principles of socialisation where scholars aimed to understand children's brand recognition, brand knowledge and connections with brands in relation to the different age periods. In other words, the research is dominated by a "production of consumption" approach where the children's position is (a) passive and (b) seen as "vulnerable". At the same time, there are some scholars who have recognised the sociological perspectives and, consequently, children's own voices and the importance of brand symbolism in children's lives is considered, for example by Cody, (2012), Marion & Nairn (2011), Nairn *et al.* (2008) and Elliot & Leonard (2004). Significantly, these papers address the phenomena of children's identity formations and consumption symbolism to some extent. Importantly, the research here more specifically focuses on brand relationship theory.

This thesis moves then to the next chapter which develops the methodology deemed appropriate to uncover the sophisticated role that brands play in children's lives and hence, fill the gap identified in the preceding Literature Review. This research adopted a qualitative method and it is interpretive and exploratory in its nature. A series of semi-structured interviews took place with thirty-one children between the ages of 5 and 9 from the same geographical area which was East London. Importantly, pilot phase activities revealed the complexity and challenges of eliciting valuable data from children in this age category. Consequently, semi-structured interviews with the elements of phenomenology were used in this research in order explore children's lived experiences with brands. Moreover, the least-adult approach was used together with frequent meetings to establish and develop trusting relationships with the respondents.

These relationships provided rich and valuable insights into the lives of children. Mayall (2000, p. 121) argues that the adoption of the role of least-adult means 'blending in to the social world of children, not siding with adults, operating physically and metaphorically on the children's level in their social worlds'. The details of the application of this approach are presented in section 3.6 of the Methodology chapter.

Finally, the research closes the gap identified in the Literature Review by providing meaningful discussion of the research findings in which it is evident that children as consumers do have meaningful relationships with brands which buttress their identity projects. The concluding chapter here provides evidence of the contribution to knowledge and outlines limitations and areas of future research.

6.2 The origin of the research idea

This research is conducted with children as consumers where CCT ideas and perspectives are used to gain an understanding of, and explore children's relationships with their brands. The dominant approach to study children as consumers deploys the principles of socialisation/developmental psychology where children are perceived as "becoming" rather than "being". In these studies scholars focus on children's cognitive abilities in relation to consumption and their overall linear way of development as consumers (Martens *et al.,* 2004,). Consumer socialisation is defined and conceptualised by as John (1999, p.186) as 'a developmental process that proceeds through a series of stages as children mature into adult consumers'. In contemporary studies, John's (1999) ideas are still predominantly adhered to and scholars study children's brand awareness, brand recognition and brand symbolism using the principles of consumer socialisation. Cody (2012), Martens *et al*. (2004), and more recently, Nairn & Spotswood (2015) argue that still little is known about the significance of consumption and consumer culture in children's everyday lives.

Scholars recognise that children are neglected in consumer culture research primarily because of their "becoming" position. This research adopts the principles of New Sociology according to which children are seen as an autonomic category with its own culture and life experiences. It also adopts elements of Cook's (2010) idea of Commercial Enculturation which emphasises that meanings occur through different processes of socialisation in a variety of different social contexts. The New Sociology

principles adopted here add richness to the research by providing children with voices and thereby create the much-needed autonomic position in the here and now. Subsequently, the epistemological and ontological perspectives in this research are that children are active beings with their own voices and own lived experiences who create their own lived worlds.

The adopted position echoes with the tenet of CCT research which supports the view that consumers are viewed as active participants of the consumption world who use and re-work the symbolic meanings of brands/products for their own individual and social purposes. Brand relationship theory reflects CCT principles and explores how consumers interact and form relationships with brands in order to construct their self-identities and add meanings to their lives. Consequently, children's relationships with brands are studied here from the children's own understanding of the reality and world in which they live, in other words the research here explores the role of brands in children's lives.

6.3 Justification for the research

'From the moment they [children] are born, they are already consumers' (Buckingham, 2011, p. 23) and they have been treated by marketing practitioners as consumers from the early 20th century, according to Cook (2009). Research by John (1999), McNeal (1969, 1964) and Ward (1974) provide valuable insights into child consumer socialisation. It was not until 1989 however, that the Convention on the Rights of the Child officially recognised that children have inherent rights and this was a belated turning-point in the study of children as consumers. Furthermore, Prout & James (1989) underline the need to study children in their own rights.

The research here is based on the Corsaro (2005) ideas of interpretative reproductionism which is fully explained in the Literature Review. Having clarified the sophisticated nature of the development of research on children, it is important to recognise that children are a distinct and attractive segment of consumers. They are current and future consumers and influencers of family purchasing decisions. Since it is well established by scholars how children develop and become consumers, the research aim here is to understand more fully how children as active consumers use brands and how these brands support them in their daily lives. This aim originates from the ideas of Cook

(2004, 2008), Martens *et al*. (2004) and Cody (2012) who identify the neglected position of children in consumer culture research and Nairn *et al*. (2008) who precisely argue that the CCT approach is very useful in providing understanding of children's interactions with brands and their symbolic meanings.

As children's relationships with their brands is the main focus of this research, it is significant to gain understanding of their lived experiences with their brands and interpret the meanings which they attach to them. Thompson *et al*. (1989, p.138) argue that phenomenological interviews are 'perhaps the most powerful means for attaining in-depth understanding of another person's experience' and hence, the elements of this methodological approach was adopted in the research here as well as qualitative semi-structured interviews. The nature of the research project is exploratory and interpretivist which allows us to gain a deep understanding of children's connections with their brands.

6.4 Research questions and objectives

From the beginning of this research project it was evident that children's voices are "missing" in consumer culture research/CCT. Consequently, the aim of the research is to explore children's relationships with brands in which brand relationship theory is a part of CCT. One of the key papers on which this research is based is Ji's (2002) contribution in which she proved that children do have relationships with brands, however her study has a limited sample and uses the Piagetian developmental psychology approach therefore, a deep understanding of the meaningful role that brands play in children's lives from their own perspectives is not fully gained. At the same time, Ji's (2002, p. 372) notion is valuable for the research here in that she revealed that children establish a relationship with a brand if he/she 'stores their past interaction with a brand in their memory' and, at the same, if they are able to retrieve that information.

Fournier's (1998; 2009) notion that brand relationships add and provide meanings to consumer's lives and, therefore, such relationships are purposive and supportive for individuals in living their lives is central to this research. As the link between CCT and brand relationship theory is clarified in the Literature Review chapter, here children are recognised as active consumers. The current research addresses the following main and additional research questions:

Main research question: What role do brands play in children's lived experiences and identity projects?

In answering the main research question, other questions are raised. These are:

1. How do children's brand relationships support them in their everyday lives?
2. What is the nature of children's consumer brand relationships?
3. How do brands support children's consumer identity projects?

Furthermore, based on the fundamental principles of CCT and brand relationship theory, the following objectives have been developed in order to answer the research questions:

- to explore children's understanding of the symbolic meanings of their brands;
- to gain an understanding of how children use the symbolic meanings of brands in their personal and social lives; and
- to gain an understanding of different aspects of children's social and personal lives from their own perspectives (in the context of the school environment, their homes and with their parents and friends).

The research questions are addressed in the ten themes which are fully discussed and explained in Chapters 4 and 5 and summarised in Table 6.1 Achieved Research Objectives (below). This Table provides evidence explaining how the research objectives are achieved and the basis for the formation of each of the ten themes. These themes explore the different roles that brands play in children's individual and social lives. More specifically, they demonstrate how brands support children in different social settings and highlight how they use brands for their identity construction. Consequently, these themes clearly acknowledge the purposive and meaningful nature of children's relationship with brands.

Table 6.1 Achieved Research Objectives

	Key findings	Research Objectives		
		1 - To explore children's understanding of the symbolic meanings of their brands.	**2 - To gain an understanding of how children use the symbolic meanings of brands in their personal and social lives.**	**3 - To gain an understanding of different aspects of children's social and personal lives from their own perspectives (in the context of the school environment, their homes and with their parents and friends).**
1	Brand relationships in supporting children's self-esteem	Brand are used by children as symbols of the technological era.	The possession of technological brands (and/or abilities to use them) helps children to feel competent, knowledgeable and consequently, self-esteem is enhanced.	Children's self-esteem is enhanced in the social context of the digital age where children share symbolic meanings which they attach to brands – children feel connected to the technological era in which they live.
2	Brands for children's self-image and self-presentation construction and the popular brands and children's self-presentation	Children recognise a brand's personality characteristics and consequently, they have clear associations with these brands. Children recognise the socially constructed symbols which are attached to certain brands – brands here are used as a symbol of popularity. Brands are used by children as a symbol of self-achievement.	Children are willing to incorporate brand-personality traits they recognise to their own selves in order to achieve their desired selves (self-personal goals) and gain social acceptance. Children use brands for their own (individual) self-construction, presentation and in order to categorise themselves in their social world and, at the same time, get closer to their desired self.	Relationships with these brands support children's social selves in their everyday lives - children have a clear understanding of how they would like others (their friends) to see them, where each child has his/her own individual and unique motivations. Brand relationships here support children's individual self-concepts in different social contexts.
3	Symbolic brands as tools for social categorisation	Brands are used by children as a symbol of categorisation – a cool brand, for example.	Children use brands as stereotypes, or as a symbol of catergorisation - cool/ not cool, in order to differentiate one individual from another and to support his/her feelings of belonging to a particular social category.	Children's relationships with brands are purposive and help children to position themselves and others through categories that are meaningful to them in their world.

4	Brands as supporters of socially constructed gender-identity	Children perceive some brands as being for adults only where the symbolic meanings of these brands are, at times, deeply gendered to them - brands here are used as symbols of masculinity and femininity.	Children use brands for their own unique social purposes, meaning they have interpersonal attraction motives – brands here provide children with the support which they need for their social interactions with the opposite gender, where their gender identification and its reinforcement is very important to them.	Children, through the gendered symbolic meanings they attach to brands, and further use of these brands in their daily lives, are seeking to express their individuality amongst their peers.
5	Brands as supporters of children's social status – liminal stage	Brand and product characteristics are used here as symbols of children's transition into adulthood.	Children use brands, particularly clothing brands, and their product/brand characteristics to support their transition into adulthood and complete their social identities.	Children perceive themselves as being in a transitional period. Children do understand their position in society and that they are aware that childhood is a temporary period for them and that the older they get, the closer to adulthood they become
6	Children's fantasy worlds and their brands	Each superhero brand has a very distinctive brand identity and personality which triggers children's imaginations and fantasies.	Superhero brands help children to create their "fantasy" worlds where they are able to obtain different fictional personal characteristics such as super powers and, consequently expand their self-identity.	Children have a strong belief that fictional brands provide them personally with real power and a real ability to fly, climb buildings or run faster, thus demonstrating that they perceive a fantasy world as a being part of their real world - children connect with these brands at an imaginative level where imagination is part of the fantasy which helps them to express their desired identities and create "fantasy" worlds.
7	Brands and social embeddedness	The bond between children and brands can be facilitated through the interpersonal relationships with parents/caregivers.	Children have meaningful connections with brands which are embedded into their social relationships with parents/ caregivers.	Child consumer socialisation is influenced by the social relationships children have with their parents. Regularly, children consume products/brands which are purchased by their parents and/or familiarise themselves with brands through the parents/ care givers positive experiences.
8	Brands and social affiliation	Children agree (amongst themselves) and share symbolic meanings which they attach to certain brands which are not constrained by the school	Children use brands as a source of affiliation, meaning that these brands hold very strong social and localised symbolic values for them - children have created a	Schools are one of the social places for children where they collectively experience the sense of community and belonging and where they have

		environment - children strongly associate some commercial brands with school only.	sophisticated meaning-systems in which brands chosen by them are symbols of belonging.	the shared identities of being pupils/students.
				The symbolic meanings of brands are embedded in the context of children's social lives at school where these brands provide children with the social benefits of being accepted by peers. Consequently, these brands are important in children's lives, especially in the context of the school environment where they are able to gain the sense of social connection with their peers, in other words these brands provide children with 'linking values'.
9	Brands as buttressing children's life-projects	Brands represent children's hobbies and they associate these brands with their particular hobbies/ interests. Children attach symbolic meanings of fun and enjoyment to such hobby-brands	Children use these brands and their symbolic meanings to define themselves in the context of their hobbies and interests and, consequently, they contribute to their life-projects The role that these brands play in children's lives is to support their social relationships with peers and family members.	Children have hobbies and interests which contribute significantly to their lives. These hobbies include playing football, supporting football clubs, dancing, shopping, and playing computer games. The brands here contribute to their individual and self-identity construction and result in them having more enjoyable and more fulfilling lives
10	Brands as leisure resources	Brands are used by children at home as major sources of entertainment.	Brands here provide both functional/experiential benefits associated with entertainment and fun.	Children perceive home as a place of entertainment and fun and they believe that brands here mainly exist to serve this purpose in their lives.

6.5 Key research findings

This research, with children aged between 5 and 9 years old, clearly identifies that children do have relationships with brands. They create and recognise the symbolic meanings of brands from an age earlier than existing research revealed. Furthermore, it was revealed that children have meaningful, purposive and hence valuable relationships with their brands. These relationships support them in positioning themselves in the world and help them to define and construct their social and individual identities.

Notably, it was revealed that technological brands, some fashion and cartoon brands are sources of symbolic meanings which children use in their daily lives. Children have extremely positive relationships with these brands. These brands support their self-esteem, self-presentation and self-image. This research strongly emphasises the importance of the digital age and the inseparable position of children within it which is clearly supported by the relevant brands. Children's self-esteem is considerably enhanced by engagement with their technological brands and they allow them to define themselves as experts. Self-presentation and self-image, which are parts of children's self-construction, are very evidently supported by children's relationships with their brands (cartoon and fashion brands). These brands contribute to individual and social aspects of children's selves.

Another valuable role that brands and brand-relationships serve in children's lives is that they help them to define their individual identities (of being cool, for example), obtain feelings of belonging to a specific desired group and categorise others. More specifically, the *Apple* brand is identified as a "cool" brand for children. This brand is well studied in adult consumer culture literature as a brand with very strong symbolic meanings and this research reveals that young children are able to recognise symbols from the adult consumer world and use them in an almost identical manner.

It is shown here that brands provide one of the sources of social knowledge and children's meaningful connections with gendered brands help them to position themselves in society and achieve their social goals. Gender knowledge, as an aspect of social knowledge, is obtained by children in the social environment of the home. It is revealed here that children themselves identify the gendered nature of brands which they then use in order to achieve a desired response from others (creation of social relationships). Therefore, children have highly purposive relationships with these

brands.

Whereas gendered brands contribute to the children's self-construction and help them to create relationships with others, other brands support their transition from childhood to adulthood, consequently these brands help children to not only construct their selves, but also get closer to their desired position in society. Children themselves are well-aware of their social position (childhood) and they form relationships with brands which they associate with adulthood in order to communicate their desired position in society.

This research identifies that super hero brands can be seen as bridges between real and fantasy worlds for children. Significantly, through pretend play which is supported by super hero brands, children place themselves in a fantasy world. Furthermore, these brands are sources of different human traits which children then incorporate into their selves. Through these play activities children are able, to some extent, to experience independency from the restrictions imposed by the adult world. These relationships are creative and bring joy to their lives.

It is identified in this research that children's brand relationships are a highly social phenomenon for which social interactions are important. These relationships are embedded into children's relationships with their parents/ caregivers. The children's parent's/ caregiver's lived experiences with brands are influencing brand preferences for children. In the situation where brands are embedded into these relationships, this research acknowledges the value of the dyadic relationship for children.

Children in this research value brands which hold social meanings and provide them with feelings of belonging in the school environment. There is clear evidence that there is a contiguity between consumption and the social world in which children use commercial brands as sources for their shared identities. The purpose of the relationships which children have with such brands here is to provide them with feelings of affiliation, connection with the school community (elements of tribalism) and feelings of collectiveness and acceptance. Therefore, these relationships support individual and social self-identity formation.

Furthermore, children's self-identity construction is supported by relationships with

brands in the context of children's different life-projects, for example dancing and supporting football clubs. This research reveals that brands are a significant part of children's life-projects and these life-projects take place within the social sphere which includes family and peers. Children form relationships with brands whose meanings reflect certain hobbies and interests in order to support their self-definition and facilitate relationships with others who are involved in similar activities.

Having explained the key findings of this research which primarily addresses the importance of brand relationships for children's identity construction, the finding of this research demonstrates that children gain functional and experiential/emotional benefits from relationships with brands. More specifically, children desire and value leisure and entertainment in their lives and, therefore connect to such brands.

6.6 Contribution to knowledge

This research contributes to the fields of CCT, brand relationship theory and studies of children as consumers. The contributions of this research are primarily sustained from the positioning of children based on the principles of New Sociology and elements of commercial enculturation. This research brings children, who were previously neglected, into the CCT body of knowledge. The main contribution of this research to knowledge is revealing that children are active consumers who have purposive and meaningful relationships with brands and this occurs from ages younger than previous studies revealed. This research contributes to our understanding of how children as consumers use brands in their daily lives, meaning that brand relationship theory is extended beyond well-established research on adults and teenagers.

This research is in line with the principle proposed by Fournier (2009, p.335) and that is that 'relationships are purposive, involving at their core the provision of meanings to the persons who engage them'. This research claims that children have deep and meaningful relationship with brands. Brands help children to feel connected to the world around them (digital age), create their own worlds (fantasy worlds), obtain the feeling of personal achievements and attain their social goals. Brand relationships help children to transition to the adulthood and support their desired social status. Furthermore, it is claimed in this research that, the relationships children have with brands are purposive and meaningful because children believe that certain brands help them to be accepted by their peers. Also, brand relationships help children to position

themselves in society through the symbolic meanings of brands which they create/re-create and recognise.

Another significant contribution is made by this research and that is that brands are embedded within children's interpersonal social relationships and thus have a buttressing role for them in their everyday lives (person-object-person). This research is in line with that of Cova (1997), Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) and Cova & Cova (2002) who have recognised the social nature/role of brand/brand relationships. This thesis argues that brands are part of the child-parent/caregiver interaction and children recognise their parents'/caregivers' lived experiences with brands. It is revealed in this research that the child-parent interaction uncovers the nature of children's connections with brands.

One of the areas of CCT and brand relationship theory is an exploration of identity projects of consumers. This research contributes to this area as it reveals that brands are inherently implicated into children's sense of identity and self. A variety of theories and dimensions which have previously been used (Belk, 1982,1988; Belk *et al,* 2010; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Levy, 1959; Holt 2002) to explain brand relationships with adult samples are applied here, hence a significant contribution to CCT is made. This research claims that children's self-construction is supported by children's relationships with brands. More specifically, brands enhance children's self-esteem, self-confidence, support their desired selves and help children to define themselves. Furthermore, this research reveals that children use brands for their self-images and self-presentations by actively recognising and creating/re-creating the symbolic meanings of brands.

Moreover, this research claims that brands are important in children's lives as markers of social belonging. This is in line with the ideas by Kates, (2000); Aledin (2012); Nairn *et al.* (2008) whose research is focused on adult consumers. Brands help children to highlight their belongings to the desired social groups and support their life-projects. More specifically, this research identified the *Apple* brand as a brand which represents a cool brand. Other brands which children associated with school help them to express their belongingness to their schools and provide feelings of affiliation. Lastly, brands support children's life-projects, more specifically children use certain brands to demonstrate their engagement/belonging with/to their hobbies and consequently, sustain

their relationships with others. Therefore, the importance of brands' symbolic meanings and children's abilities to use and re-create these meanings should not be overlooked. This research demonstrates the complex nature of the brand relationship phenomenon and now extends it to include children.

This research also proposes a new definition of children's brand relationship which is based on the knowledge obtained in this explorative research project and that is that:

> Children's brand relationships are meaningful and purposive commercial relationships that are embedded within their social and individual worlds and which have a mediating/supportive role for their identity construction and social affiliation.

This qualitative research uniquely uncovers the nature of children's relationships with their brands which is obtained through careful analysis of the children's own voices and opinions where the least-adult approach has been used in order to ensure that the data faithfully represents children's thoughts and feelings. This is a unique factor of this research and it is correlates and contributes to CCT in which consumers are active contributors and creators of the world in which they live.

6.7 Research limitations

In keeping with research of a similar nature, this interpretive and exploratory research has studied children and their brands in the here and now and the generalisability of the findings can be perceived as a limiting factor and consequently, there can be little doubt that a larger sample might have improved the richness of the findings. However, Braun & Clarke (2013) claim that:

> '…generalizability is not a meaningful goal for qualitative research, because of assumption about the context-bound nature of knowledge in qualitative research and interest in the *detail* of the phenomenon being investigated' (p.280).

It is acknowledged that eliciting valuable data from children in this age category is extremely challenging. However, studies of a similar nature have proved to be successful and influential with samples significantly smaller than the research here. That said, by adopting the position of least-adult and making frequent visits to build relationships with the children proved to be a successful strategy and adequate,

valuable, rich and robust data was eventually obtained. Furthermore, making generalisations from this study must be treated with caution on the grounds that the sample was recruited using the snow-balling method and all children were from a narrow geographical area and a similar demographic.

The pilot studies clearly revealed the challenges of eliciting valuable data from young children and it was clear that any attempt to deploy a novel methodology would be extremely challenging. Heeding the advice of Thompson *et al.* (1989) regarding obtaining data regarding lived experiences with brands, semi-structured interviews and elements of phenomenology proved highly successful once the all-important relationships with the children had been formed.

Finally, it is recognised that the interviewed children all came from the geographical area of East London which has its own cultural setting and, as Edwards & Holland (2013) point out, replication of interview responses is inherently impossible. This, they argue, is because interviews are:

> '… a social interaction with many elements coming into play. These include location and context, the physical and social space within which the interview takes place, power relations at the social and individual levels and a wide range of characteristics, predispositions, understandings and emotions of interviewer and interviewee' (p.92).

6.8 Implications for managers/ marketing practitioners

According to Childwise (2016, p.2) 'Children's total spending power in the UK is £7.5 million per year' and research for Experian (2016) revealed that children in the 5 – 10 age group receive £5 a week (on average) in pocket money, significantly more than children in the rest of Europe. Clearly, children in the UK represent an attractive market segment for marketing practitioners and as pointed out by many, comparatively little is known about them in terms of their consumer behaviour as will be highlighted in the following section of this chapter (Future Research). Based upon the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made to marketing managers/ practitioners.

1. This research, exploring how children use brands in their individual and social lives, revealed that children as young as 5 (much younger than earlier

research suggests) develop relationships with brands that are purposive and meaningful, very much as adults do. The overarching recommendation to managers here therefore, is to recognise that children as consumers behave in much the same way that adult-consumers behave and it is worth repeating the ideas of Fournier (1998, 2009) in this respect in that brand relationships add and provide meanings to consumer's lives and, therefore, such relationships are purposive and supportive for individuals in living their lives. Much like teenagers and adults, children use brands to fit-in with others, to stand out, to be "cool" and a variety of other ways in a variety of individual and social contexts. Such an appreciation will undoubtedly help inform marketing practitioners in terms of how brands are positioned in the marketplace, how brand meanings could be developed and what images and messages are most likely to create and maintain brand loyalty.

2. It should be appreciated by marketing practitioners that, as with adults, the relationships that children form with brands is a highly complex phenomenon and gaining a deep understanding will undoubtedly help them develop more effective marketing approaches. This research strongly argues that the commonly used child socialisation approach to study children as consumers, in which children are viewed more as "developing into adult consumers" than being consumers in-their-own-right, may not be the most revealing when used in isolation. This research clearly revealed that children as young as 5 form relationships with brands that serve valuable purposes in their lives in the here and now. Obviously, they will develop into adult consumers but given the significance of the market segment, marketing practitioners might be well advised to view children as far more active consumers in their own right and in the here and now.

3. The importance managing and maintaining relationships that consumers have with brands is well documented in the academic literature and evident in commercial marketing practice in respect of teen and adult consumers. The findings of this research clearly show that children as young as 5, like teens and adults, derive much value from brand relationships and, whilst little to date is known about how long these child brand relationships will last, and whether or not they will continue into adulthood, there is a strong

possibility that some will. Therefore, it is recommended here that brand managers should recognise such possibilities and adjust their brands management strategies accordingly.

4. An innovative aspect of this research was providing the children with autonomy by listening to their own voices, as opposed to those of their parents/care-givers, and this albeit challenging approach proved to be a method which gained rich and valuable insights not only into the "worlds" of the children, but also into how they used brands in their individual and social lives. Clearly, having such an appreciation would undoubtedly add much value to marketing research which could, in turn, help practitioners to position and promote their offerings more effectively by developing the relevant brand-values for children.

5. Allied to the point above, this research strongly supports the recommendations of Nairn *et al.* (2008) who point out that adoption of the CCT approach would almost certainly help practitioners gain a deeper understanding of the brand relationships of children as consumers which, in turn, will help them to further develop their marketing approaches towards children in an ethical and more effective way. By adopting the CCT approach, marketing researchers and practitioners would gain deeper understandings of children's social and cultural lives which would inform their marketing approaches and brand strategies towards children.

6. According to the academic literature, remarkably little is known about children as consumers regarding relationships they have with brands and the purposes that these relationships serve in their daily lives. With such little understanding, it follows that the management of these consumer relationships is an area that is worthy of attention. In this respect, this research is mindful of the findings of Avery *et al.* (2014) who argue that 'despite the "R" in CRM and the $11 billion spent on CRM software annually, many companies don't understand customer relationships at all'. The findings of this research project and its review of literature on child-consumption and child-consumer behaviour, firmly suggests that children should not be neglected in the practice of CRM.

6.9 Future research

Notwithstanding the challenges of interviewing children, there can be no doubt that further exploring the roles that relationships that children have with their brands is a fascinating and potentially valuable area of academic research. This research clearly revealed that children are engaging with brands at surprisingly young ages (younger than earlier research suggests). Whilst much research potential exists in the overall sphere of children's brand relationships, future research might specifically address and explore the following:

1. Despite the recommendations and advice given by Nairn, Griffin & Wickes (2008) some nine years ago, remarkably little research using the CCT approach to study children's brand relationships has been carried out. This exploratory research project has followed this advice and revealed the important supporting roles that brands play in children's daily lives. The adoption of the CCT approach, as opposed to using the Piagetian developmental cognitive model, facilitates the exploration into such aspects as children from different social classes, ethnicities and geographical areas undoubtedly providing greater richness into the largely under-researched area of studying children's brand relationships.

2. The research of Fournier (1998) and Fournier & Yao (1997) investigating the durability, longevity and developing nature of brand relationships focuses on an adult sample. As mentioned in the preceding section, no research appears to have been conducted into the durability, longevity and developing nature of children's brand relationships and this would be a potentially valuable area to research in terms of informing marketing practice.

3. Little or no research has been carried out exploring the role that media plays in mediating children's relationships with brands. This has not been the focus of the research here, however it is clearly a potentially rich area for future research. This research revealed the fact that children are well aware of the digital age in which they live and the role that brands play within it. The prevalence of advertising deployed on digital platforms is well acknowledged and exploring this from young children's perspectives is potentially a rich and valuable area to research.

4. Following on from the above, what role does social media play in the context of children's brand relationships? The children in this research used Facebook, Instagram and others to keep in touch with friends, share pictures, and socialise generally. How, therefore, does social media mitigate relationships that young children have with brands?

5. The influence of parent/care-givers on children's brand relationships has not been the primary focus of this research but it has been revealed here that such influence does exist. Consequently, this is a further area worthy of deeper study.

6. Finally, but importantly, it is worth stressing and repeating here that comparatively little still is known about children's brand relationships in the marketing arena, despite this being highlighted some ten years ago by Cook (2008, 2010); Nairn *et al.* (2008); Martens *et al.* (2004) and Cody (2012). Furthermore, where research does exit, the prevailing methodology is still the consumer socialisation approach. The research here reveals both the value of the New Sociology approach championed by Cook (2010) and also the associated challenges associated with affording young children autonomy and voices. It is proposed here that the reason such an approach is not common is because of the challenges discussed in the Methodology chapter including the time needed to develop the necessary skills and relationships with the children to be interviewed. Over the course of conducting this research project it has been necessary to deploy a cross-disciplinary approach involving the literature from, most notably, the child psychology field and the field of sociology. It has been beyond the scope of this research to develop full expertise from these important contributory disciplines but it is very evident that similar future research would benefit greatly by acquiring such knowledge and skills. Joint research involving child psychologists and sociologists would clearly yield rich and valuable insights into the phenomenon.

Summary

This chapter concludes the study. It contributes to our understanding of children's relationships with brands in which they are positioned as active consumers with their

own voices. This research explored children's lived experiences with brands and reveals the importance of them in their daily lives and for the construction of their identity projects. Consequently, the brand relationship theory is extended and children are more strongly positioned in consumer culture research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1, UEL Ethical Committee and approval

17 June 2014

Dear Diliara,

Project Title:	**Children and their Brands: An investigation in to Consumer Identity projects.**
Researcher(s):	**Diliara Mingazova**
Principal Investigator:	**Dr Ayantunji Gbadamosi**

I am writing to confirm the outcome of your application to the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), which was considered at the meeting on **Wednesday 28th May 2014**.

The decision made by members of the Committee is **Approved**. The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation. Your study has received ethical approval from the date of this letter.

Should any significant adverse events or considerable changes occur in connection with this research project that may consequently alter relevant ethical considerations, this must be reported immediately to UREC. Subsequent to such changes an Ethical Amendment Form should be completed and submitted to UREC.

Approved Research Site

I am pleased to confirm that the approval of the proposed research applies to the following research site.

Research Site	Principal Investigator / Local Collaborator
Children will be interviewed in their homes	Dr Ayantunji Gbadamosi

Approved Documents

The final list of documents reviewed and approved by the Committee is as follows:

Document	Version	Date
UREC Application Form	2.0	16 June 2014
Parents' Participant Information Sheet	2.0	16 June 2014
Parents' Consent Form	2.0	16 June 2014
Child Participant Information Sheet	2.0	16 June 2014
Child Participant Information Sheet 5-years olds	1.0	16 June 2014
Child Consent Form	2.0	16 June 2014
Interview questionnaire and Topic guide	1.0	13 May 2014
Recruitment Advertisement	1.0	13 May 2014
Disclosure Barring Service Certificate	1.0	13 May 2014
Risk Assessment	1.0	13 May 2014

Approval is given on the understanding that the UEL Code of Good Practice in Research is adhered to.

Please be aware it is your responsibility to retain this ethics approval letter for your records.

With the Committee's best wishes for the success of this project.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Fieulleteau

Ethics Integrity Manager

University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)

Email: **researchethics@uel.ac.uk**

<u>UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON</u>

Consent to Participate in an Experimental Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants.

Children and their Brands: An investigation into Consumer Identity Projects.

I have the read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what it being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the experimental programme has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me and for the information obtained to be used in relevant research publications.

Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any

time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

………………………………………………………………….

Participant's Signature

…………………………………………………………………………………..

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

DILIARA MINGAZOVA…………………………………………………………..

Investigator's Signature

………………………………………………………………………………

Date: …………………………

Children's information sheet

University of East London

University way, Docklands Campus, E 16 2RD

University Research Ethics Committee

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Catherine Fieulleteau, Ethics Integrity Manager, Graduate School, EB 1.43
University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD
(Telephone: 020 8223 6683, Email: researchethics@uel.ac.uk).

The Principal Investigator(s)

Diliara Mingazova

50 Felixstowe Court, London, E16 2RR

07586681155, d.mingazova@uel.ac.uk

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in
deciding whether to participate in this study.

Project Title

Children and their Brands: An investigation into Consumer Identity Projects**.**

Project Description

This project tries to understand which brands children like and how they feel about them and why they are important to them.

Confidentiality of the Data

Any information provided will be kept safe, secret and not shared with anyone else. When he project is finished, all information will be deleted. Names will be changed. Only the researcher will have access to the research data. If any children decide to leave the interviews, the researcher will destroy all the information that has been collected immediately.

Location

Children will be interviewed in their homes and transcriptions and analysis will take place on UEL property.

Disclaimer

Children do not have to help and, if they do, can stop at any time if they are not happy.

Parent's information sheet

University way, Docklands Campus, E 16 2RD

University Research Ethics Committee

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact: Catherine Fieulleteau, Ethics Integrity Manager, Graduate School, EB 1.43 University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD (Telephone: 020 8223 6683, Email: researchethics@uel.ac.uk).

The Principal Investigator(s)

Diliara Mingazova

50 Felixstowe Court, London, E16 2RR
07586681155, d.mingazova@uel.ac.uk

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

Project Title

Children and their Brands: An investigation into Consumer Identity Projects.

Project Description

This research seeks to further our understanding how children form relationship with brands (metaphorically speaking) and how these relationships inform their identity. Children will be asked to participate in interviews (and games), first to establish which brands are important to them and then to gain deeper understanding of the roles that they play in their lives. No hazards or risks are envisaged and, consequently no distressed will be caused to participants

Confidentiality of the Data

All information received will be kept securely and not shared with third parties. Strict confidentiality and anonymity will be employed at all times. Data will be stored electronically with passwords set. All date will be erased on completion of the research project. Analysis of the data will be used in a publication of the PhD in which participants' names will not appear and names will be substituted with fictitious ones. Only the researcher will have access to the research data. If a participant withdrawn from the study, the his/ her data will be destroyed by the researcher immediately.

Location

Children will be interviewed in their homes and transcriptions and analysis will take place on UEL property.

Remuneration

No remuneration will be made.

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to take part in this study, and are free to withdraw at any time during tests. Should you choose to withdraw from the programme you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

Children's information sheet (5 years old) University of East London

University way, Docklands Campus**,** E 16 2RD

University Research Ethics Committee

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Catherine Fieulleteau, Ethics Integrity Manager, Graduate School, EB 1.43

University of East London, DocklandsCampus,London E16 2RD (Telephone: 020 8223 6683, Email: researchethics@uel.ac.uk).

The Principal Investigator(s)

Diliara Mingazova

50 Felixstowe Court, London, E16 2RR 07586681155,

d.mingazova@uel.ac.uk

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

I am asking you to read this letter because it explains why I would like you to talk to me about things that you like to buy in shops. Would you like to help me by playing some games and

drawing some pictures?

Project Title

Things that children like to buy in shops and how they feel about them.

Project Description

I would like you to help me understand how you feel about things you like to buy in shops.

Confidentiality of the Data

Anything you say or any pictures you draw will be kept safe, secret and not shown to anyone else. When the project is finished, all your pictures and everything I have written down will be destroyed. Your name will be changed so no one will be able to recognize you. I will be the only one that will know what you have told me and I will not show your pictures to anyone. If you decide that you do not want to carry on helping me, I will destroy your pictures and the notes I have made recording what you have told me.

Location
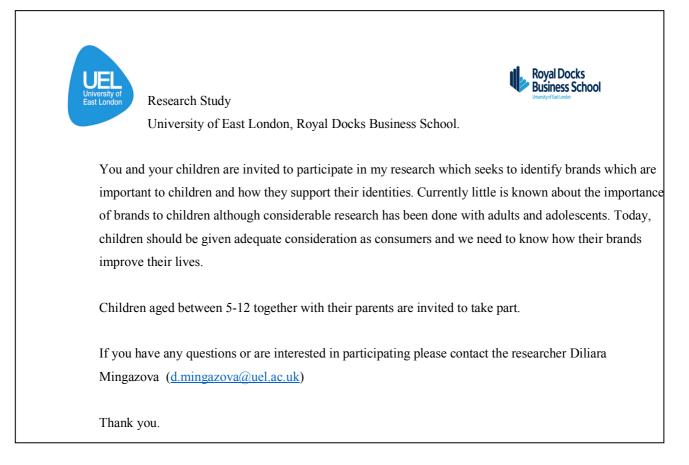
You will be interviewed in your home and I will look at your pictures and notes I have made about what you have told me at the UEL university.

Disclaimer

You do not have to help and, if you do, you can stop at any time if you are not happy.

For Parents/Guardians

Research Study

University of East London, Royal Docks Business School.

You and your children are invited to participate in my research which seeks to identify brands which are important to children and how they support their identities. Currently little is known about the importance of brands to children although considerable research has been done with adults and adolescents. Today, children should be given adequate consideration as consumers and we need to know how their brands improve their lives.

Children aged between 5-12 together with their parents are invited to take part.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating please contact the researcher Diliara Mingazova (d.mingazova@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you.

For Children

Research Study

University of East London, Royal Docks Business School.

Would you like to help me with my research?
I want to know about your favourite things and why they are important to you.
In my research we will talk about you, your friends and shopping. Also, we will play games, draw pictures and have fun!

If you want to talk about helping me please email me:Diliara (d.mingazova@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you and I look forward to meeting you soon.

Birthday presents

.   1) If you could choose 5 birthday presents – what would they be?

.   2) What would you give as a present to your best friend? Why do you think   he/she would like it?

3) Why do you think he would she/he like this present?

Appendix 6, Interview Questionnaire and Topic Guide

Interview Questionnaire and Topic Guide
What is your name?
How old are you?
Do you have any brothers or sisters?
Which school do you go to?

Research Q1, 2, 3.
Could you please tell me about the things you have in your bedroom?
Can you describe how you feel about them?
Do you have a favourite items of clothes, shoes/trainers, toys, phones, cars, etc.?
What do you like about them?
Is there anything else you really like?
Can you describe how you feel about them?

Research Q1, 2, 3.
How do you spend your pocket-money?
Are there any clothes/ toys/ sweets/ drinks etc. that you really like to choose and buy yourself?
Can you describe how you feel about them?

Which special presents have you received in the last year (birthday, Christmas, etc.)?
What is it about them that makes them special for you?

Research Q1, 2, 3.
Can you name a brand you have – or really want to have?
Why have you chosen this brand?
Can you describe how you feel about this brand?

Can you wear what YOU want at school?/ Do you have to wear a school uniform?
If yes – would you like to wear what you want?
If yes- what would you wear?
Why would you like to wear that?
If no – what do you wear to school?
Why do you like to wear that?
If you have to wear a school uniform, do you have special days when you are allowed to wear what you like?
What do you like to wear on these special days?
Why do you like to wear this?
What do other children wear on these special days?
What do you think about what these other children wear?
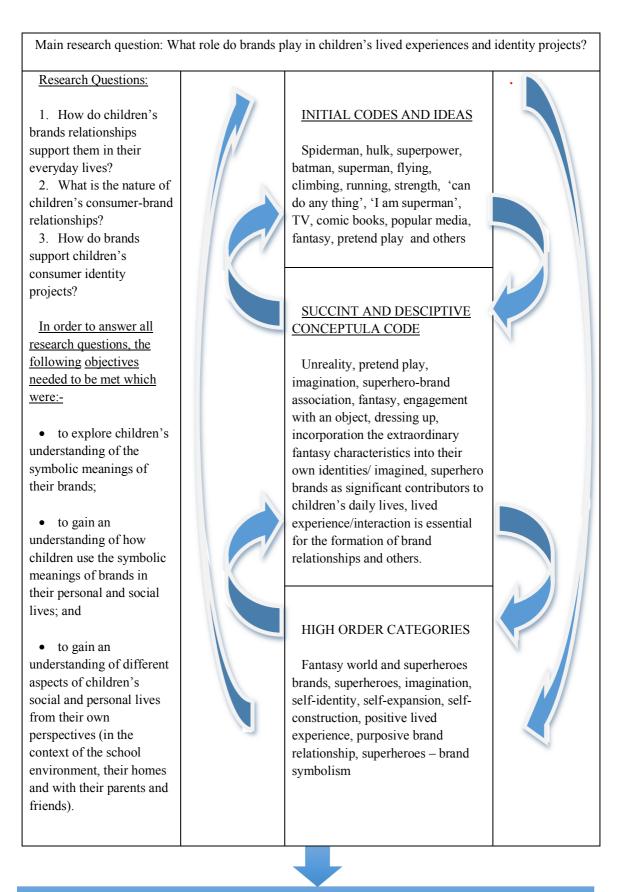
What do you like to wear when you are going out with your friends?
Can you tell me the name of the things which are the most popular at the moment ?
Why do you think they are popular?
Or - What things are popular in your class into at the moment?
Why are they popular?
Is important for you to wear branded clothes (giving some examples if necessary)?
Which brands?
Why do you like these brands?
Why is this brand important to you?
Can you describe how you feel about this brand?
Are you a Nike/ Apple/ etc. person?
Can you describe how you feel about this brand?
How do you feel about other people who like this brand?

Appendix 7, List of interviewees and interviews - Demographic Information and brand re-called by each child

Participants	Gender	Age	Borough of London	Ethnicity	Brands recalled during the interviews
P1	M	9	Dagenham	NWB	Apple, Samsung, X-box, TV, Snapchat, Adidas, Dior Perfume, Nike (Jordan), Sports direct, Spiderman, Ninja Turtles, Asda, Nike Air, Chelsea F.C, Facebook, Primark, Topshop
P2	F	8	Dagenham	NWB	X-box, Samsung, Sony PlayStation, Elsa, (Frozen), Nike (Jordan), Apple, George (Asda), Nike (Jordan), Sainsbury, Clarks, British knights, Primark, Topshop, Red Jeans(Versace)
P3	M	5	Barking	NWB	X-box, Gru, Minions, Polo (RL), Hulk, West Ham FC, Nike
P4	M	8	Dagenham	NWB	Apple, Sony PlayStation, Batman Nike (Jordan), Lacoste, George (Asda), Superman, Nike Air, Chelsea F.C, X-box, Samsung
P5	F	9	Barking	WB	Apple, X-box, Facebook, Adidas, George (Asda), Clarks, Pineapple, Capezio and Blosch, VideoStars, Converse
P6	M	9	Dagenham	WB	Sony PlayStation, Adidas, Apple, Lacoste, George (Asda), Batman, Nike/Nike Air/Huaraches, Tesco
P7	M	9	Dagenham	NWB	Sony PlayStation , Adidas, Apple, Lacoste, Huaraches, Tesco
P8	M	9	Barking	WB	X-box, Puma, Apple, Polo (RL), Primark, Topshop, Nike, Adidas, West Ham, Adidas
P9	M	9	Barking	WB	Sony PlayStation, Adidas, George (Asda), F&F (Tesco), Superman, Apple, X-box, Tesco, Sports direct, Dior Perfume
P10	F	8	Barking	WB	Samsung, Sony PlayStatio, Elsa, (Frozen), DKNY, Paco Rabane, Sports direct, Sainsbury, Kickers, Nike, Pineapple, Capezio, Blosch, Facebook, VideoStars, Hello Kitty (Trainers), Primark, Topshop, Red jeans(Versace) perfume
P11	M	8	Barking	WB	Samsung, Sony PlayStation, Ninja Turtle, Apple, Adidas/Adidas perfume, F&F (Tesco), Nike Air, West Ham FC, Facebook, Sports direct
P12	F	7	Barking	WB	Apple, X-box, F&F (Tesco), Sports direct Elsa (Frozen), Paco Rabane, Clarks, L'Oréal,
P13	F	5	Dagenham	WB	Apple, Peppa Pig, Olaf (Frozen), Elsa (Frozen), Sainsbury
P14	M	8	Dagenham	WB	Sony Play Station, Facebook, Adidas, F&F (Tesco), Superman, Hulk, Nike/Nike Air, Chelsea F.C., Sports direct
P15	F	7	Dagenham	NWB	Apple, Nike, Elsa, Olaf (Frozen), Clarks, Pineapple, Capezio, Facebook, Peppa Pig
P16	F	6	Dagenham	NWB	Peppa Pig, Olaf (Frozen), F&F (Tesco), Elsa, Sainsbury, Gru

P17	M	9	Barking	NWB	Apple, Samsung, X-box, Polo (RL), Superman, Tesco, Nilke/Nike Air, West Ham FC, FacebooK, Primark, Topshop
P18	F	7	Dagenham	NW	Apple, Tesco (F&F), Red jeans(Versace) perfume
P19	M	6	Dagenham	NW	Sony PlayStation, Lacost, Batman
P20	F	6	Barking	NW	Olaf , Anna, Elsa(Frozen); F&F (Tesco), Pineapple, Capezio, Blosch, Hello Kitty
P21	F	5	Barking	WB	Sony PlayStation, Olaf ,Anna, Elsa(Frozen); Sainsbury, Kickers
P22	F	8	Barking	NW	Apple, L'Oréal , George (Asda), Kickers, Nike, Red jeans(Versace) perfume
P23	M	5	Dagenham	NWB	Puma, West Ham FC
P24	M	5	Dagenham	NW	X-box, Apple, Samsung, Puma
P25	F	6	Dagenham	NWB	X-box, Hulk, Superman
P26	M	5	Dagenham	NW	Apple, X-box Nike(huaraches), Spiderman, Gru
P27	F	9	Dagenham	NW	Sony PlayStation, Adidas, Apple, F&F (Tesco), Pineapple, Capezio, Hello Kitty, Primark, Topshop, Red jeans(Versace) perfume
P28	F	9	Barking	WB	Samsung, X-box, Nike (Air) Apple, L'Oréal, Kickers, Nike, Pineapple, Capezio, Blosch, Facebook, VideoStars
P29	F	9	Dagenham	NWB	Apple, Adidas, Kickers, Nike, Pineapple, Capezio, Topshop
P30	F	9	Dagenham	NWB	Apple, X-box, Hello Kitty, Kickers, Nike, Primark, Topshop
P31	M	5	Dagenham	NWB	X-box, Apple, Ninja Turtles,George (Asda), Gru

Appendix 8, Coding process and Theme formation

Main research question: What role do brands play in children's lived experiences and identity projects?

Research Questions:		INITIAL CODES AND IDEAS	

Research Questions:

1. How do children's brands relationships support them in their everyday lives?
2. What is the nature of children's consumer-brand relationships?
3. How do brands support children's consumer identity projects?

In order to answer all research questions, the following objectives needed to be met which were:-

- to explore children's understanding of the symbolic meanings of their brands;

- to gain an understanding of how children use the symbolic meanings of brands in their personal and social lives; and

- to gain an understanding of different aspects of children's social and personal lives from their own perspectives (in the context of the school environment, their homes and with their parents and friends).

INITIAL CODES AND IDEAS

Spiderman, hulk, superpower, batman, superman, flying, climbing, running, strength, 'can do any thing', 'I am superman', TV, comic books, popular media, fantasy, pretend play and others

SUCCINT AND DESCIPTIVE CONCEPTULA CODE

Unreality, pretend play, imagination, superhero-brand association, fantasy, engagement with an object, dressing up, incorporation the extraordinary fantasy characteristics into their own identities/ imagined, superhero brands as significant contributors to children's daily lives, lived experience/interaction is essential for the formation of brand relationships and others.

HIGH ORDER CATEGORIES

Fantasy world and superheroes brands, superheroes, imagination, self-identity, self-expansion, self-construction, positive lived experience, purposive brand relationship, superheroes – brand symbolism

Theme: Children's fantasy worlds and their brands

Appendix 9, Number of children mentioned each brand

Brands mentioned by children in this research	Number of Children mentioned a brand
Adidas	10/31
Anna (Frozen)	2/31
Apple	22/31
Asda/Asda(George)	8/31
Batman	3/31
Bloch	4/31
British knights	1/31
Capezio	7/31
Chelsea F.C,	3/31
Clarks	4/31
Converse	1/31
Dior Perfume	2/31
DKNY (perfume)	1/31
Elsa (Frozen)	8/31
Facebook	8/31
Gru	4/31
Hello Kitty	4/31
Hulk	3/31
Kickers	6/31
L'Oréal	3/31
Lacoste	4/31
Minions	1/31
Nike Jordan/ Air/ Huarache	21/31
Ninja Turtles	3/31
Olaf (Frozen)	5/31
Paco Rabane	2/31
Peppa Pig	3/31
Pineapple	7/31
Polo RL (Perfume)	3/31
Primark	7/31
Puma	3/31
Red jeans(Versace) perfume	5/31
Sainsbury	5/31
Samsung	8/31
Snapchat	1/31
Sony PlayStation	11/31
Spiderman	2/31
Sports direct	6/31
Superman	5/31
Tesco/Tesco F&F	12/31
Topshop	8/31
VideoStars	3/31
West Ham FC	5/31
X-box	15/31
Overall 44 brands were mentioned by children in this research	