AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

Brand names in the mind of Hungarian, Russian, and Laotian kindergarten children: Evidence from word association experiments

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ABSTRACT

Brand names are prevalent in our society: they influence consumption and future buying behaviour. As research has shown, children are also aware of brands and brand names, and brand names learned in childhood can influence their attitude towards the known brands.

The collaboration of various scientific fields including pedagogy, psycholinguistics, and marketing communication enabled us to investigate the appearance of brand names in the verbal consciousness of 4–5-year-old kindergarten children of different nationalities.

In the frames of this research, brand names were identified by the application of an interdisciplinary and comparative word association experiment conducted with 100 Hungarian, 100 Russian, and 100 Laotian children, from the 4–5-year-old age group. The experiment is a traditional word association experiment and the research design was not set into the context of any brands or consumption habits research.

Results show that in the experiment, several globally known brand names were elicited (e.g. Lego, My Little Pony, Batman), however significant cross-cultural dissimilarities were also revealed. Most activated brand names can be connected to the world of children (e.g. toy brands), but in the experiment spontaneously elicited brands reflect not only the conception of childhood but also the society and culture surrounding the children.

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INTRODUCTION

Brands and brand names can be the most valuable assets of companies (Kohli, LaBahn, & Thakor, 2001). Speaking of brands, we must distinguish between brand value and brand equity: the former can be regarded as the financial surplus a brand gives the product, while the latter is the perceptions, acceptations, feelings, and connections of consumers to the brand (Tiwari, 2010). While brand value can be calculated in several ways (e.g. Sattler, 2014), brand equity emerges in the mind of the consumer, in the first line through the associations created in the mind (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1998).

Associations to brands can be seen in two contexts. One is the associations – words – which come to the mind when encountering the name or logo of brands. These associations are researched in several studies (e.g. Franzen & Bouwman 2001; Kovács, 2019a; Lenart, 2017; Lenart, 2018; Lenart & Markovina, 2021). Another possibility is to analyse which words prime the brand name. Studies on this topic are not so often conducted, because it is not easy to predict when a brand name is elicited in a research setting that is not specifically designed to research brands and brand associations.

One possibility to see how brand names are primed, is to examine word association data and search for brand names. Word association data is often collected in psycholinguistic and psychological research (e.g. Cramer, 1968; Kent & Rosanoff, 1910; Postman & Keppel, 1970). In word association experiments, stimulus words are presented to subjects, who have to name the first word which comes into their mind by seeing/reading the stimulus word. Word association experiments have a wide variety of research designs (cf. Cramer, 1968).

In word association experiments, brand names may occur as a response to a stimulus word. Finding and interpreting these associations, the consumer behaviour of a certain group can be analysed (Kovács, 2019b). This method not only gives an insight into product categories elicited by the group but also provides a historical imprint of the brand names, which were characteristic to the given era (Kovács, 2019b).

In this paper, we analyse which brand names are elicited by 4–5-year-old children. The data collection was conducted in 2018–2019 in Hungary, Russia, and Laos with 100 kindergarten children from each country (300 respondents in total). The primary goal of the data collection was to obtain linguistic information from the 4–5-year-old children enabling the researchers to gain a language-dependent insight into the world of kindergarten children in a cross-cultural context. The secondary goal was to lay the foundations of a consecutive research with 10–12-year-old children enabling the observation and investigation of the linguistic development of language users from the three countries and cultures.

By examining the collected data, we saw that several brand names were elicited by the participants. The goal of the paper is thus to analyse and categorise the brand names occurring in the word association data and to show how global and local brands are presented in the mind of children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Investigating in interdisciplinary collaboration gives researchers the possibility of focusing on a specific field from different disciplines' perspectives. It may lead to the increase of public awareness and better understanding – superior knowledge of the examined case (Frickel et al., 2016). In this case, we focus on the field of childhood studies, psycholinguistics and marketing communication (branding).

General characteristics of 4–5-year-old children

From birth to adulthood, children explore the world in many ways, however, there are certain steps in their development in a biological and in a psychological context. When we focus on the characteristics of 4–5-year-olds we need to keep in mind there might be achievement gaps however the following benchmarks are widely achieved by all of them.

By the end of their 5th year, most children have an understanding of their own needs, and the feelings of others. They can form good relationship with children and adults. They can work in groups, share commonly used objects and are able to understand agreed behaviour or rules of a group or a class, so in this sense, they can work or play harmoniously. 4–5-year-old children look for differences, patterns, and change. They can ask and can be asked questions about why things happen and how things work. They are also interested and curious about understanding social structures such as family or institutional groups. They use sentences and explanations during imaginary play. They can talk about ideas, as well they can clarify their feelings and views on certain topics relevant (Endrődy et al., 2019).

Following Vygotsky, the importance of play is undisputed, it enhances creativity, it provides the possibilities of imagination and it might lead to wider experiences than learning in a more formal way itself. Play might help children to connect imaginary to reality and help them to interpret the world around themselves (Vygotsky, 2004).

Brands

Brands are not easily defined. According to Aaker (1991: 7) "a brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors", while the often-cited definition of the American Marketing Association says "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (American Marketing Association, 2020). One of the most important elements of brands is their name: "[t]he brand name is [...] one of the most powerful sources of identity" (Kapferer, 2008: 193).

Brands can be defined in different contexts, and they have different characteristics depending on the viewpoint from which they are defined.

– To the consumer brands represent added values to a product,
– brands can be seen as entities that exist only when connected to a product or a service,
– as legal category brands are symbols and
– brands influence consumer decisions (Kapferer, 2008: 9–13; cf. also Baumgarth, 2004; for an overview, see Bruhn, 2004).

The above definitions see brands primarily as distinguishing elements on a product: we instinctively know however that brands are also value-laden and not interchangeable with each other. Through consumer (and brand) socialization we learn the values of the brand together with the characteristics of the branded product (Keller, 1998). We learn for example the taste of our favourite chocolate and know why we prefer it to other brands. As Keller (1998) elaborates, we create associations to the brands we encounter – favourable or unfavourable ones – and judge the brands according to our brand knowledge and the created associations.

Esch (2014) emphasizes that brands reside in the mind of the consumer. This is in line with Franzen and Bouwman (2001) and the brand view of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1998). They also underline that brands are existing only in the mind and are defined and positioned through their associations. Similarly, Meffert, Burmann, and Koers (2002) distinguish between branded product (which is the object itself and what we mostly think of as a brand) and an actual brand that only exists in our minds – thus they see the brand partly as a cognitive entity. In this regard, brands are psychological constructs. As Keller (1998: 10) formulates: „a brand is something that resides in the minds of consumers".

The position of brands in the mind of the consumer is described in detail by Franzen and Bouwman (2001), who assume that complex cognitive processes lead to the creation of brands, in which associative processes play an important role. Hughes (2018) points out that in this process strong associations and associations formed at a younger age are the most relevant ones.

Brands and children

Research on children and brands started already in the 1940s and since then it is a research topic at the crossroads of branding, marketing, and consumer behaviour (Götze, 2003).

2–3 years old children start to develop product interest and brand preferences (Götze, 2003; Zanger, 2004). Brand names and the respective logos are perceived by young children already at the age between 3 and 6 years and they connect them to the corresponding product category (Esch, Schaarschmidt, & Baumgartl, 2019). Brand name awareness arises rather at the age of 5 because younger children do not recognize written brand names (cf. Dammler cited by Götze, 2003; Zanger, 2004).

Research showed that for younger children brands represent rather a familiarity, while children older than 12 have a deeper knowledge about brands, brand names, and the meaning of those brands and what the brand symbolizes (Achenreiner & Roedder John, 2003). 8–10 years old not only differentiate brands, but they also know different characteristics and social status connected to brands (Melzer-Lena cited by Esch, 2014). Brand preference and feelings toward brands are characterized by a dichotomy: it can be positive or negative (Zanger, 2004). By 10+-year-olds brands are also an instrument for identification (Rodhein, 2006). Children at the age of 6 are aware of 200 brands, while at the age of 10 the number of familiar brands is increased to 300–400 (McNeal, 1999).

Connecting children to a brand may not have just the benefit to buy a brand once or twice: it can create a bond to a brand that accumulates to thousands of dollars – or even more – in a lifetime (Hughes, 2018: 126). It is important to note, that this relationship is formed not exclusively by top toy brands. Children thus can be seen as actual consumers (e.g. toys) and as potential consumers for the future (e.g. certain food products) (Zanger, 2004). Preferences formed at a young age can last long: according to a study 52% of brands used by 17 years old

were still used by them when they were over 30 years old (Raab et al., 2010: 139). Just think of your favourite brand of chocolate from your childhood – you may still favour it, or if it is discontinued you would most likely buy it when it is available on the market again – e.g. during a so-called "retro week" of a food discounter. The relationships formed to brands – or even branded entities like a destination or a music band – can influence purchase and consumption for decades (Hughes, 2018). A good example of it is the description of Langner et al. (2019: 1336), who describes how brand preference can arise to Milka from the first contact until young adulthood through the years.

After the age of 3 children can be considered as an independent target group with their wishes and desires (Zanger, 2004). The 3E-s apply to branding to children: emotions, enjoyment, and experiences (Hughes, 2018: 127). One way to apply the 3E-s is by creating brand characters and brand heroes, another is the building of brand communities (Hughes, 2018). Hughes (2018) describes the attachment of children with the BERMY (brand emotional response model for youth) model, which is based on Keller's brand model (1998). The model is a pyramid with the following hierarchical levels from below to above: 1) Awareness and initial emotional response; 2) Experience and enjoyment 3) Engagement and desire 4) Emotional connection 5) Attachment 6) Relationship. Brand associations together with memories to the brand use are created on the second level.

Children as actual consumers have considerable purchasing power: in the early 2000s, an average child in Germany had a monthly "income" (e.g. pocket money) of approx. 150 EUR, half of which she or he spent according to her or his own decision (Zanger, 2004). Children also influence the decisions of their parents in cases where the actual buyers are parents, but the consumer is the child (Zanger, 2004). It is also known that children also influence purchases of their parents when the product user is the parent, e.g. by buying a family car (Zanger, 2004). Later phenomenon is called indirect purchasing power.

It must be noted however, that toy brands may also not exclusively target children. Consider for example Lego, which started as a toy brand but now entire worlds inside Lego – like Lego Technic, Lego Architect, or Lego Mindstorms – are attributed to grown-up Lego-enthusiasts. It is even possible to develop your own Lego sets via Lego Ideas.

The process of growing up include also physical and mental development as well as a socialization process (Zanger, 2004), including consumer socialization (Götze, 2003). Marketing efforts targeted to children must thus consider these processes, but also the strong regulations and ethical guidelines which determine marketing activities targeted on children (Zanger, 2004). Although different strategies exist to target children (for an overview see Dammler, Barlovic, & Melzer-Lena, 2000; Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; Zanger, 2004; Zanger & Griese, 2000), it is important to note that such activities are highly controversial, often discussed, and sometimes even condemned (Schor, 2005; UNICEF, 2018; Zanger, 2004).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study has emerged from the data of a previous research conducted on kindergarten children in Hungary, Laos and Russia (Endrődy et al., 2019, 2020; Lenart & Markovina, 2021; Lenart, Markovina, Endrody-Nagy, & Makhmutova, 2019). Although the focus of the data collection was not on brand names, we found that brand names appeared in the database, as part of the

world of the children. The appearance of brand names in word association databases is not uncommon (cf. Kovács, 2019b), although we know of no previous research where brand names appeared in word association data of 4–5-year-old children were analysed.

The objective of current research is threefold after identifying and classifying brand names in the existing database to see:

1. whether the appearing brand names are the ones consumer research connects to children (thus verifying Törőcsik, 2011),
2. to research similarities and differences in the Hungarian, Laotian and Russian data and
3. to see the distribution of local or global brand names in the data.

DATA AND METHODS

Word associations as a method

Word association data collection as a research method goes back to the late 19th century when Galton (1879, 1883) conducted his first experiments with associations. In word association experiments a word is presented to the subjects (stimulus), to which they should name (or write down) the first word or words which come to their minds. The experiment can be conducted in several ways, e.g. by restricting the responses to a given category or by allowing multiple answers (cf. Cramer, 1968). Since the first analyses several word association experiments were conducted, creating thus word association databases which can be used to answer different research questions and to analyse how words are stored in the mind (e.g. Karaulov, 2002; Kent & Rosanoff, 1910; Kiss et al., 1973; Liang, 2010; Nelson, McEvoy, & Schreiber, 1998; Postman & Keppel, 1970).

Participants

One hundred respondents were selected from each investigated country – Hungary, Russia, and Laos respectively –, thus a total number of 300 children took part in the research. All participants came from the 4–5-year-old age group, with the below distribution of male and female respondents (Table 1).

Participants of the survey came mainly from an urban background. In Hungary, 97 respondents lived in the following seven towns (urban environment): Budapest, Szeged, Tata, Zalaegerszeg, Gödöllő, Kistarcsa, and Veresegyház and 3 respondents lived in the Hungarian village of Kesztölc. The Russian survey was conducted in two kindergartens in the capital city, Moscow. Laotian respondents were all from the same kindergarten within Nongteng, a relatively well-developed district in the outskirts of the capital, Vientiane.

Table 1. Participants in the selected three countries

	Male	Female	Not available
Hungary	43	56	1
Russia	50	50	0
Laos	39	55	6

Data collection

The research was conducted in the form of 15–20-min interviews, moderated by the children's tutors/nurses. To alleviate the unfamiliar situation for the kindergarteners, the shoulder-to-shoulder method was applied (Griffin, Lahman, & Opitz, 2014; Meisinger et al., 2004), an approach that aims at creating a comfortable environment for the children where they feel at ease expressing their thoughts. Respondents could freely play and move during the interview, meanwhile were requested to say out loud whatever comes to their mind when hearing the ten stimulus words. Consequently, the linguistic data was written down into the printed questionnaires by the tutors.

The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions about the 10 stimulus words. Two to four questions were applied for each stimulus word to gain a bigger amount of linguistic information that can be transformed into a linguistic corpus. The obtained corpora were analysed utilizing the online corpus analysing tool, the Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014).

RESULTS

In the dataset, we found 218 cases, where a brand name appeared. We found also 11 cases, where the named word could be a reference to a brand, although the word itself is not a brand name (T-rex, Dinosaur; dinosaur figures are part of several toy brands, like the dinosaur sets of Lego). We included the names of superheroes and fairy tale characters also as brand names, since they are brand heroes, and such figures are especially important to children (Hughes, 2018).

The brand names found in the datasets are in most cases names of construction sets (e.g. Lego), dolls (e.g. Barbie), and superhero or fairy tale figures (e.g. Superman), with three exceptions (Table 2). One is the soft drink brand Pepsi, named by 6 respondents in Laos, the other one is also in the Laotian data, the name ອບີງຈັນເຊັນເຕີ (Vientiane Center), which is a mall in Vientiane (place of one of the biggest indoor playgrounds in Vientiane) and the third exception is Mercedes named by a Russian child.

The only brand name which appeared at all three data collection sites is Lego and sub-brands of Lego (Table 3).

All the above-mentioned brand names were the response to the stimulus word toy/game, except Pepsi. Pepsi was mentioned altogether 6 times, 4 times to the stimulus word toy/game, and 2 times to the stimulus word black. In some cases, not the brand name itself was named, but the verbalized form of the name indicating playing with the brand: legózik (to play with lego), duplózik (to play with Duplo), zingózik (to play with Zingo!), jávázik (to play with Java).

Interestingly, in the Lao respondent group play, lego was expressed in three different ways: ເກມກໍ່ (building game); ເກມຕໍ່ລົດ (game of assembling vehicles); and ເກມລົດ (game to play with cars). Unlike many languages where the brand name lego is directly incorporated into the lexicon of that particular language, the Lao language substitutes the noun lego with another word or syntagm and explains it semantically.

DISCUSSION

Although Törőcsik (2011) describes children as being attracted to digitalized objects, the brand names named in the current research fall into the category of traditional children's toys, like construction sets or dolls.

Table 2. Brand categories. Please note, that there could be overlappings in the categories: My Little Pony is a fairy tale figure, but My Little Ponys also exist as toys and sets

Brand names by toy category	Occurrence in the dataset H = Hungarian, R = Russian, L = Laotian
Construction sets	
Lego (Duplo, Friends, Ninjago; see Table 3)	H, R, L
Constructor (конструктор)	R
GeoMag	H
Java	H
детали и магниты (*construction set*)	R
Трек (*construction set*)	R
Dolls/Stuffed toy	
Trudy (Труди)	R
Barbie/Барби	H, R
Bride Barbie, Zombie Barbie, Elephant Barbie, Zebra Barbie	
Кукла Рапунцель (*similar to Barbie*)	R
Кукла Лель (*similar to Barbie*)	R
Кукла Беби Бон ("*Baby Born doll*", a doll set of a newborn baby and accessories)	R
Teddy bear (Мишка Тедди)	R
Fairy tail figures/Cartoon figures	
My Little Pony (póni/Az én kicsi pónim/поняшки)	H, R
Angry Birds	H
PAW Patrol (Mancs őrjárat)	H
Мой щенок ("*My puppy*" a Russian cartoon)	R
Экскаватор (*excavator toy*)	R
Sky (Скай)	R
Лошадка (*toy horse*)	R
Sam Fireman (Tűzoltó Sam)	H
Elsa (ເອວລ່າ)	L
Action/Superhero figures	
Transformers	H
Autobot (автобот)	R
Bumblebee (Бамблби)	R
Captain America/Капитан Америка	H, R
Spiderman (Pókember)	H
Batman/Бэтмен	H, R
Superman (Супермен)	R
Cobra man (человек "Кобра")	R
Joker (Джокер)	R
Hulk (Халк)	R
Other toys/games	
Hotwheels (Хотвилс)	R
Пластелин (*a kind of play dough*)	R
100 экспериментов (*Set for experiments*)	R

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Brand names by toy category	Occurrence in the dataset H = Hungarian, R = Russian, L = Laotian
Hello Kitty (Хеллоу Китти)	R
Pokemon (ໂປເກມ້ອນ)	L
Cosmic Express (video game)	H
Zingo!	H
Rubik's cube (кубик Рубика)	R
Matryoshka doll (матрёшка)	R
Other brands	
Mercedes (Мерседес)	R
Pepsi (ເປບຊີ)	L
Vientiane Center (ວຽງຈັນເຊັນເຕີ)	L

Table 3. Named Lego brands. A = together with the verb form legózik (to play with Lego). B = together with the verb form duplózik (to play with Duplo). C = all written forms are pronounced 'lego'

Brand name Hungarian data	Number of associations	Brand name Russian data	Number of associations	Brand name Laotian data	Number of associations
Lego	50 (A)	лего	23	ເກມກໍ່ ເກມຕໍ່ລິດ ເກມລິດ	19 (C)
Friends	2				
Ninjago	2				
Dupló	6 (B)				

As we see from the results, both global and local brand names occurred in the data. In the data from Hungary, only Java could be seen as a local brand name. Java is a construction set made of plastic tubes and connecting elements. It was developed in Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s and was sold not only in Hungary but also in Germany (Jáva..., 2020). In the Russian data, several local toy names occur, from Construction sets to dolls and other toys. The majority however are global brands, from which Lego and sub brands of Lego (102 associations) and Barbie (22 associations) represent more than 50% of all named brands.

These results show us, that 4-5-year-old children know brand names and they are spontaneously elicited in a word association experiment. It is interesting to see, that although local brands occur, global brand dominate the database. To identify the reasons for the increased occurrence of global brand names an in-depth research would be necessary. At this point we can only guess that these results may be connected to the expansive marketing activity of global brands.

Superheroes are also often named by 4-5-year-olds, although they are not the only audience group of the superhero movies: grown-ups over 55 also watch such movies (Share of..., 2020). These heroes correspond however to the brand hero image mentioned earlier. These figures –

and also those from fairy tales – are not just consumed in movies or television series: they can be found on all possible objects from towels to bags to blankets. With merchandised figures like superheroes, all possible products can be equipped thus targeting children and making "boring" products to desirable items (Törőcsik, 2011).

That these brand names are elicited by children presents that children are aware of these fictional figures. As stated above, superhero movies are watched not only by children. It can be assumed that these children remain fans of these movies and characters also as grown-ups, and that they will buy items connected to these characters: see for example Lego's Marvel series, some items of which – e.g. Lego Art – are clearly not designed for children.

It is important to note – from the linguist's viewpoint – that these children know not only the brand names themselves, but they use the verb form of the brand name to indicate that they play with the given brand. This is important because brand names could become this way generic trademarks that are used not for a specific brand but a whole product category. In this regard to playing with lego (legózni) can mean not only playing with Lego bricks but playing with all kinds of plastic bricks similar to Lego.

On one hand this is advantageous for the brand, because all other building sets will be called Lego – and their performance will be compared to the original. This strengthens the original brand. On the other hand this means also that all marketing efforts put into Lego will also partly automatically converted to other building brands – thus Lego contributes with its advertisements also to the visibility and positive perception of other building brands.

CONCLUSIONS

We showed evidence that brand names occur in a word association database of children. Almost all mentioned brand names can be connected to the world of children: they describe the toys and figures they are familiar with. The mentioned brand names are partly global names occurring at all three data collection sites, and partly local brands, known in only one country or region.

The research has however several limitations. On one hand, the occurrence of these brand names is almost exclusively connected to the stimulus word, thus it cannot be proven whether these names also appear – and in which frequency – in other contexts. On the other hand, the research was not designed to elicit and analyse brand names, hence the results are just seen as an interesting by-product of the current research and can function as a starting point for future research on the topic.

In future research, it would be interesting to explicitly ask children for brand names and to test their brand knowledge across different product categories (cf. Götze, 2003). It would be also useful to include more countries and languages into the research to see cultural and language-driven differences in brand awareness. It is also planned to test older children to have comparable databases across more age groups.

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