

The Influence of Childhood Brand Exposure on Adult Brand Loyalty: The Mediating Roles of Brand Nostalgia and Self– Brand Connection

An Exploratory Survey Study

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Sample dissertation prepared as an illustrative model

Abstract

Understanding why consumers remain loyal to particular brands continues to occupy both marketing practitioners and consumer psychologists, especially against a backdrop of declining brand commitment in many Western markets. While a substantial literature links exposure to brands during childhood with stronger adult brand relationships, the psychological mechanisms that carry this association have received comparatively little direct empirical attention. The present study examined whether the age at which a person was first exposed to a brand predicts their current loyalty to it, and whether any such relationship operates through two affective-symbolic mechanisms: brand nostalgia and self-brand connection. A cross-sectional online questionnaire was completed by adult consumers (analysed $N = 207$), each of whom nominated an everyday consumer brand they had first encountered in childhood and still used. Participants reported the age of first exposure and completed established measures of brand loyalty, brand nostalgia, self-brand connection, and brand trust. Earlier age of first exposure was significantly associated with greater brand loyalty, greater brand nostalgia, and stronger self-brand connection. A parallel mediation analysis indicated that the relationship between age of exposure and brand loyalty was carried by both brand nostalgia and self-brand connection; the direct effect was non-significant once the mediators were included, consistent with full mediation. Brand trust remained the single strongest correlate of loyalty, replicating prior work, but was unrelated to age of exposure. The findings suggest that the loyalty benefit of early exposure is not a direct effect but is realised through the nostalgic and identity-relevant meaning that childhood brands acquire. Theoretical, practical, and ethical implications— particularly regarding the marketing of brands to children—are discussed, alongside the limitations of a retrospective, self-report design.

Note on this document: This is an original [sample dissertation](#) written to demonstrate the structure, reasoning, and reporting conventions of an undergraduate research project. The study design is genuine and the analytic approach is standard, but the dataset and all reported statistics are simulated for illustration and do not describe a real data-collection exercise.

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Introduction

Brand Loyalty

Few outcomes matter more to consumer-facing organisations than the willingness of customers to return to the same brand time after time. A brand may be understood as a recognisable offering that consumers perceive as meeting a distinctive set of needs and as defensible against competing alternatives (de Chernatony & McDonald, 1992). Brand loyalty, in turn, is commonly defined as a deeply held commitment to repurchase a preferred offering consistently in the future, thereby producing repetitive same-brand buying despite situational influences and marketing efforts that might encourage switching (Oliver, 1999). Securing this commitment is rarely straightforward. There is no single formula that guarantees a consumer will stay with a brand, and the task has arguably grown harder as shoppers in many economies have become more price-conscious and more willing to substitute cheaper, unbranded alternatives.

The strategic value of loyalty helps explain why firms invest so heavily in cultivating it. Loyal customers tend to buy more frequently, are less sensitive to price, and frequently act as advocates who recommend the brand to others. The rise of social media has intensified both the opportunity and the risk: platforms allow brands to build direct relationships with consumers and to strengthen existing attachments, but they also allow dissatisfied customers to broadcast their grievances widely. In this environment, identifying the factors that genuinely underpin loyalty—rather than those that merely correlate with it—has clear theoretical and applied importance.

Researchers have proposed a wide range of antecedents of loyalty, including emotional consumer–brand relationships, product involvement, perceived brand ethics, and, most influentially, brand trust and brand affect (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Schmitt (2012), however, observed that much of this literature focuses on predicting the loyalty outcome while neglecting the underlying psychological processes that produce it. The present study responds to that critique by treating loyalty not simply as something to be predicted, but as the end-point of a psychological chain that begins, for many consumers, in childhood. Loyalty here is conceptualised and measured following Oliver (1999) and operationalised using the behavioural and attitudinal items developed by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), which together provide a holistic and well-validated index of commitment.

Childhood Brand Exposure

A recurring theme in consumer psychology is that the relationships people form with brands early in life are unusually durable. In her influential relationship-theory framework, Fournier (1998) argued that consumer–brand bonds established in childhood—often through meaningful others such as parents—can be among the strongest a person ever holds. Ji (2002) similarly proposed that the affiliations children develop with brands are more deeply rooted than those formed in adulthood, and that the ability to recall a specific brand as part of an early product memory signals a genuinely meaningful childhood relationship with that brand. Braun-LaTour, LaTour, and Zinkhan (2007) extended this reasoning by showing that adults' earliest brand memories can illuminate the present meaning of a brand, because those early experiences form the foundation on which later attachments are built.

One mechanism frequently invoked to explain such effects is mere exposure. Zajonc (1968) demonstrated that repeated, even incidental, exposure to a stimulus increases liking for it, an effect that has since been replicated across cultures and stimulus types (Zajonc, 2001). Applied to consumption, repeated childhood encounters with a brand may foster a baseline of familiarity and preference that persists into adulthood, even when the consumer cannot consciously recall when the exposure first occurred. Mere exposure, however, is principally an account of *liking*; it is less obviously an account of the rich, emotionally textured loyalty that childhood brands sometimes command. Familiarity alone does not explain why a particular breakfast cereal or chocolate bar can evoke a sense of comfort, identity, and continuity decades later. This gap motivates the present focus on two more elaborated psychological mechanisms.

It is also worth noting that childhood is a developmentally privileged period for the formation of self-defining memories. Autobiographical memory is closely bound up with the self, helping individuals to construct and maintain a coherent identity over time (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Experiences that occur during childhood and adolescence are disproportionately represented in adults' autobiographical recollections and tend to carry strong affective significance. If brands are woven into these early, self-relevant experiences—a family ritual, a celebration, a moment of comfort—they may become encoded not merely as products but as elements of personal history. This possibility suggests that the consequences of early exposure are best understood in terms of the meaning brands acquire, rather than exposure frequency alone. You may read [free dissertation samples](#) here

Brand Nostalgia as a Mechanism

The first proposed mechanism is brand nostalgia. Nostalgia is a predominantly positive, bittersweet emotion involving sentimental longing for one's past (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Within consumer research, Holbrook and Schindler (1991, 2003) showed that preferences formed during a sensitive period earlier in life can persist and that objects encountered then may become objects of nostalgic attachment. Schindler and Holbrook (2003) found that nostalgia for early experiences was a meaningful determinant of adult consumer preferences, and subsequent work has linked nostalgic brand meaning to stronger and more emotionally resilient consumer–brand relationships (Kessous, Roux, & Chandon, 2015).

Nostalgia is theoretically well suited to explaining the loyalty consequences of early exposure for two reasons. First, nostalgia is, almost by definition, oriented towards the past; a brand can only be nostalgically meaningful if it was encountered earlier in life, so earlier exposure should afford greater scope for nostalgic attachment. Second, nostalgia performs psychological functions—bolstering positive affect, social connectedness, and a sense of continuity in identity (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008)—that plausibly translate into a motivated preference for the focal brand. A brand that reliably evokes warm recollections of childhood may be repurchased not only because it is familiar, but because consuming it restores a valued emotional state. The present study therefore proposes that earlier exposure heightens brand nostalgia, which in turn supports loyalty. Need [masters dissertation help](#)? Contact us for free.

Self–Brand Connection as a Mechanism

The second proposed mechanism is self–brand connection: the extent to which a consumer has incorporated a brand into their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005). Drawing on Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self, this construct captures the degree to which a brand is used to construct, express, or signal who one is. Escalas and Bettman (2003, 2005) demonstrated that brands associated with valued reference groups become more strongly connected to the self, and that such connections predict favourable brand evaluations and behaviour. Related work on brand attachment and brand love similarly emphasises that the most powerful consumer–brand relationships are those in which the brand has become self-relevant (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012).

Self–brand connection offers a complementary, identity-based route from early exposure to loyalty. Because childhood is formative for self-concept, brands encountered during this period may become bound up with a person's sense of who they are and where they come from, rather than remaining mere functional choices. A brand that has been part of one's life since childhood can come to feel like an extension of the self, and abandoning it may feel less like switching products and more like a minor betrayal of personal identity. On this reasoning, earlier exposure should strengthen self–brand connection, which in turn should sustain loyalty. Nostalgia and self–brand connection are conceptually distinct—one is an emotional orientation to the past, the other an identity-relevant association—but both are plausibly heightened by early exposure and both are plausibly conducive to loyalty, making a parallel-mediation framework appropriate.

The Present Study

Although the link between early exposure and brand loyalty is reasonably well established, the literature has tended to document the association rather than test the processes responsible for it, and prior studies have often been longitudinal or interview-based, focusing on particular product categories such as automobiles or soft drinks. The present study contributes in three ways. First, it tests two theoretically

motivated mediators—brand nostalgia and self–brand connection—within a single model, moving beyond familiarity-based accounts. Second, it situates these mechanisms alongside brand trust, the dominant antecedent in the existing loyalty literature, allowing their relative roles to be compared. Third, it focuses on everyday consumer brands first encountered in childhood, a domain in which early, repeated, family mediated exposure is common and in which loyalty has clear commercial significance. To the best of the author's knowledge, brand nostalgia and self–brand connection have not previously been examined together as parallel mediators of the early-exposure–loyalty relationship.

Aims and Hypotheses

The overarching aim of this study was to establish whether the age at which a consumer is first exposed to a brand predicts their current loyalty to that brand, and to identify the psychological mechanisms responsible for any such relationship. Drawing on the literature reviewed above, the following hypotheses were tested.

H1. Earlier age of first exposure will be associated with greater current brand loyalty; that is, age of exposure and brand loyalty will be negatively correlated.

H2. Earlier age of first exposure will be associated with greater brand nostalgia. **H3.** Earlier age of first exposure will be associated with stronger self-brand connection. **H4.** Brand nostalgia and self-brand connection will each be positively associated with brand loyalty.

H5. The relationship between age of first exposure and brand loyalty will be mediated by brand nostalgia and self-brand connection; specifically, the indirect effects of age of exposure on loyalty through each mediator will be statistically significant.

In addition, and in line with previous research (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty was examined for comparison, with the expectation that brand trust would be positively associated with loyalty and would remain a strong correlate even when the proposed mechanisms were taken into account.

Method

Design

A cross-sectional, correlational survey design was adopted. The principal predictor variable was age of first exposure to the nominated brand. The two proposed mediating variables were brand nostalgia and self-brand connection. The outcome variable was brand loyalty. Brand trust was measured as an additional predictor for comparison and as a covariate in the mediation model. Because the central hypotheses concerned indirect (mediated) effects, the analysis combined bivariate correlation with regression-based parallel mediation analysis.

Participants

Adult consumers were recruited online through social media posts, community forums, and a university participant pool, using an opportunity sampling method. To be eligible, participants had to be at least 18 years old, fluent in English, and able to nominate an everyday consumer brand that they had first encountered in childhood and still used. A total of 241 people opened the questionnaire. Responses were excluded if participants failed an attention check, completed the questionnaire implausibly quickly, did not provide a usable brand nomination, or left core measures incomplete. After these exclusions, the analysed sample comprised 207 participants (139 women, 64 men, 4 who described their gender in another way or preferred not to say). Ages ranged from 18 to 61 years ($M = 31.4$, $SD = 11.2$). A sensitivity analysis indicated that this sample size was adequate to detect small-to-medium indirect effects with conventional power using bias-corrected bootstrapping.

Materials and Measures

The questionnaire was constructed and administered using an online survey platform. After providing consent and demographic details, participants were asked to bring to mind a single everyday consumer brand (for example, in categories such as confectionery, soft drinks, breakfast foods, or personal-care products) that they had first encountered in childhood and that they still purchased or used. All subsequent brand-specific items referred to this nominated brand.

Age of First Exposure

Participants estimated, in whole years, the age at which they were first exposed to the nominated brand, and rated their confidence in this estimate on a 7-point scale. The continuous age estimate served as the predictor variable. Participants were also asked, in an open-text field, to briefly describe their earliest memory of the brand, to support recall and to provide qualitative context.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty was measured using four items adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), capturing both purchase and attitudinal commitment (e.g., intention to keep purchasing the brand and willingness to pay a premium for it). Items were rated on a 7-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Internal consistency was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Brand Nostalgia

Brand nostalgia was measured using five items adapted from established nostalgia measures and brand nostalgia work (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003; Kessous et al., 2015), assessing the extent to which the brand evoked sentimental longing for the past and warm recollections of earlier life (e.g., that the brand reminds the participant of good times in the past and brings back fond memories). Items used the same 7-point agreement scale ($\alpha = .91$).

Self-Brand Connection

Self-brand connection was measured using seven items adapted from Escalas and Bettman (2003), assessing the degree to which the brand reflected who the participant was and was incorporated into their self-concept (e.g., that the brand reflects who they are and that they feel a personal connection to it).

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Items used the 7-point agreement scale ($\alpha = .93$).

Brand Trust

Brand trust was measured using four items adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), assessing confidence in the brand's reliability and integrity (e.g., that the participant trusts and relies on the brand). Items used the 7-point agreement scale ($\alpha = .84$).

Procedure

On opening the survey link, participants were presented with an information sheet describing the study in general terms and were required to give informed consent before proceeding. To reduce demand characteristics, the consent materials referred to a study on "consumer attitudes towards everyday brands" and did not state in advance that childhood memories would be central. Participants first provided demographic information, then nominated their childhood brand and reported the age of first exposure and their earliest memory of it. They then completed the brand loyalty, brand nostalgia, self-brand connection, and brand trust measures. The order of the mediator and outcome blocks was counterbalanced across participants to mitigate order effects. An attention-check item was embedded among the scale items. On completion, participants were fully debriefed, the aims of the study were explained, and contact details for the researcher were provided. The questionnaire took approximately 10–12 minutes to complete.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant departmental research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, no personally identifying information was collected, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point without giving a reason and without consequence. Because the study asked participants to recall personal memories, the information sheet noted that some recollections could be emotionally evocative and reminded participants of their right to stop. Data were stored securely and used only in aggregate form. The study posed minimal risk and conformed to the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines for research with human participants.

Analytic Strategy

Data were screened for completeness, attention-check failures, and univariate outliers, and the distributional assumptions of the planned analyses were assessed. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates were computed for all measures. Hypotheses H1–H4 were tested using Pearson correlations. Hypothesis H5 was tested using a regression-based parallel mediation analysis with age of first exposure as the predictor, brand nostalgia and self-brand connection as simultaneous mediators, brand loyalty as the outcome, and brand trust included as a covariate. Indirect effects were estimated using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples; an indirect effect was considered significant where the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Hayes, 2018). Analyses were conducted using standard statistical software.

Results

Data Screening and Descriptive Statistics

Prior to hypothesis testing, the data were screened for accuracy, missingness, and outliers. Cases failing the attention check or containing missing values on core measures had already been removed, leaving a complete-case sample of 207. The age-of-exposure variable was mildly positively skewed; inspection of histograms and Q–Q plots indicated that the departure from normality was modest, and analyses were robust to a logarithmic transformation, so untransformed values are reported for ease of interpretation. All multi-item scales showed good internal consistency, exceeding the conventional .70 criterion (Nunnally, 1978). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and internal consistencies for study variables (N = 207)

Variable	Mean	SD	α
Age of first exposure (years)	7.8	3.1	—
Brand loyalty	5.12	1.08	.88
Brand nostalgia	4.61	1.39	.91
Self-brand connection	4.28	1.47	.93
Brand trust	5.43	0.97	.84

Note. All scale variables rated on a 7-point scale. Age of first exposure is reported in years.

On average, participants reported first encountering their nominated brand at around eight years of age, and reported moderately high loyalty, nostalgia, self-brand connection, and trust. The most frequently nominated categories were confectionery and chocolate, soft drinks, and breakfast foods, consistent with the prominence of food brands in childhood consumption.

Correlations Among Study Variables

Pearson correlations are reported in Table 2. Supporting H1, age of first exposure was significantly negatively correlated with brand loyalty: participants who were exposed earlier reported greater loyalty. Supporting H2 and H3, earlier exposure was also associated with greater brand nostalgia and stronger self-brand connection. Supporting H4, both brand nostalgia and self-brand connection were strongly and positively correlated with brand loyalty. Brand trust showed the strongest single association with loyalty, replicating Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), but was not significantly related to age of exposure.

Table 2. Pearson correlations among study variables (N = 207)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age of first exposure	—				
2. Brand loyalty	-.27**	—			
3. Brand nostalgia	-.31***	.58***	—		
4. Self-brand connection	-.24**	.61***	.67***	—	
5. Brand trust	-.08	.64***	.49***	.52***	—

*Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.*

Parallel Mediation Analysis

To test H5, a regression-based parallel mediation model was estimated with age of first exposure as the predictor, brand nostalgia and self-brand connection as simultaneous mediators, brand loyalty as the outcome, and brand trust included as a covariate. Unstandardised path coefficients are reported in Table 3. Age of first exposure significantly predicted both mediators: earlier exposure was associated with greater nostalgia ($a_1 = -.14$, $p < .001$) and stronger self-brand connection ($a_2 = -.12$, $p = .002$). Each mediator, in turn, significantly predicted loyalty when controlling for the other mediator and for brand trust (nostalgia: $b_1 = .28$, $p < .001$; self-brand connection: $b_2 = .34$, $p < .001$).

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Table 3. Unstandardised coefficients for the parallel mediation model predicting brand loyalty

Path	B	SE	p
Age → Nostalgia (a_1)	-.14	.030	< .001
Age → Self-brand connection (a_2)	-.12	.038	.002
Nostalgia → Loyalty (b_1)	.28	.052	< .001
Self-brand connection → Loyalty (b_2)	.34	.049	< .001
Brand trust → Loyalty (covariate)	.41	.058	< .001
Age → Loyalty, total (c)	-.094	.031	.003
Age → Loyalty, direct (c')	-.034	.024	.158

Note. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. The full model accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in brand loyalty, $R^2 = .56$, $F(4, 202) = 64.3$, $p < .001$.

The total effect of age of first exposure on loyalty was significant ($c = -.094$, $p = .003$), but the direct effect was reduced to non-significance once the mediators were included ($c' = -.034$, $p = .158$). Both indirect effects were significant, as their bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals excluded zero: the indirect effect through brand nostalgia was $-.039$ (95% CI $[-.067, -.016]$), and the indirect effect through self-brand connection was $-.041$ (95% CI $[-.072, -.015]$). The total indirect

effect was $-.080$ (95% CI $[-.118, -.046]$). This pattern is consistent with full parallel mediation: the relationship between early exposure and adult loyalty was carried by both the nostalgic and the identity-relevant meaning of the brand. The full model, including brand trust, explained a substantial 56% of the variance in brand loyalty. The conceptual model and the estimated paths are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual parallel-mediation model.

Age of first exposure \rightarrow Brand loyalty, mediated in parallel by Brand nostalgia and Self-brand connection, with Brand trust as a covariate.

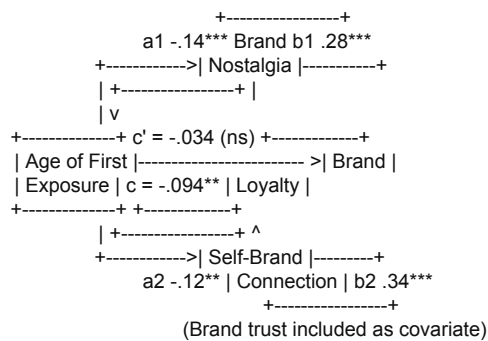


Figure 1. Solid paths represent statistically significant effects. The direct path (c') became non-significant once both mediators were included, while both indirect paths remained significant.

Summary of Findings

In sum, all five hypotheses were supported. Earlier exposure predicted greater loyalty (H1), greater nostalgia (H2), and stronger self-brand connection (H3); both mediators predicted loyalty (H4); and the early-exposure-loyalty relationship was fully mediated by nostalgia and self-brand connection in parallel (H5). Consistent with prior research, brand trust was the strongest single correlate of loyalty but was unrelated to the age at which the brand was first encountered, indicating that it operates through a route distinct from early exposure.

Discussion

This study set out to determine whether the age at which a consumer is first exposed to a brand predicts their adult loyalty to it, and to identify the psychological mechanisms responsible. The results indicate that earlier exposure is associated with greater loyalty, and—more importantly—that this association is not direct but is carried by two affective-symbolic mechanisms: brand nostalgia and self-brand connection. When these mediators were taken into account, the direct effect of age of exposure on loyalty disappeared, while both indirect effects remained significant. Brand trust, the dominant antecedent in the existing loyalty literature, was again the strongest single correlate of loyalty, but it was unrelated to age of exposure, suggesting that it represents a separate pathway to commitment.

Interpreting the Mediated Relationship

The central contribution of this study is to reframe early exposure not as a direct cause of loyalty but as an upstream condition that allows two kinds of meaning to accumulate. The nostalgia pathway suggests that brands encountered early in life can become repositories of sentimental value: consuming them restores a positive, continuity-affirming emotional state associated with the past (Routledge et al., 2008; Sedikides et al., 2008). The self-brand-connection pathway suggests that early brands become bound up with identity, such that the brand comes to feel like part of who the consumer is (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). These accounts are complementary rather than competing; both mediators retained independent predictive value when entered simultaneously, implying that early brands acquire both emotional and identity-relevant significance.

This interpretation advances familiarity-based explanations of early-exposure effects. Mere exposure (Zajonc, 1968) can account for elevated liking, but it is less able to explain the depth of attachment that childhood brands sometimes command. The present findings suggest that the durability of these attachments rests on the way early brands become embedded in autobiographical memory and the self concept (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), acquiring meaning that ordinary familiarity does not confer. In doing so, the

study responds to Schmitt's (2012) call for research that examines the psychological processes underlying loyalty rather than simply predicting the outcome.

The finding that the direct effect was fully mediated should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Full mediation in a cross-sectional design does not establish that no direct pathway exists; it indicates only that, in these data, the measured mediators accounted for the observed association. Other unmeasured mechanisms—habit, accumulated satisfaction, or social influence—may also contribute, and the relatively modest size of the total effect indicates that early exposure is one contributor among several rather than a dominant determinant of loyalty.

The Continuing Primacy of Brand Trust

Consistent with a large body of prior work (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Sahin, Zehir, & Kitapçı, 2011), brand trust emerged as the strongest single correlate of loyalty. Importantly, however, trust was unrelated to the age of first exposure, which implies that the early-exposure mechanisms identified here operate independently of, rather than through, trust. This is theoretically informative: it suggests that loyalty is multiply determined, with a cognitive-evaluative route (trust in the brand's reliability and integrity) coexisting alongside an affective-symbolic route (nostalgia and identity) rooted in early experience. For brands, this implies that loyalty built on childhood meaning is not a substitute for, but a complement to, loyalty built on demonstrated reliability. It also cautions against over-interpreting the relative weakness of the early-exposure effect, since the two routes may reinforce one another over the consumer lifespan.

Practical and Ethical Implications

For marketers, the results suggest that the value of reaching consumers early lies less in repetition for its own sake than in becoming part of meaningful, self-relevant experiences—family rituals, celebrations, and moments of comfort—that can later be recalled with warmth. Nostalgia-oriented communications and identity-affirming positioning may therefore be effective ways of activating the latent value of early

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exposure in adulthood (Reisenwitz, Iyer, & Cutler, 2004; Kessous et al., 2015).

These commercial possibilities, however, raise significant ethical questions, because the same mechanisms operate on children who may be poorly equipped to recognise persuasive intent. There is longstanding concern that young children do not fully understand the purpose of advertising and may be unduly influenced by it (John, 1999; Kunkel et al., 2004), and evidence that childhood advertising exposure can produce durable, biased product evaluations that persist into adulthood (Connell, Brucks, & Nielsen, 2014). If early exposure confers loyalty by embedding brands in identity and nostalgic memory, then deliberately targeting children to secure lifelong customers is ethically fraught, particularly for product categories with health implications. The present findings should therefore be read not as an endorsement of marketing to children, but as a reason for caution and for continued scrutiny of such practices by researchers, regulators, and practitioners.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, the design was cross-sectional and correlational, so causal direction cannot be established; it is possible, for example, that already-loyal consumers reconstruct their histories so as to recall earlier exposure, or that loyalty fosters nostalgia rather than the reverse. Longitudinal designs that follow consumers over time would provide stronger causal evidence, and experimental manipulations of nostalgia or self-relevance could test the proposed mechanisms more directly. Second, age of first exposure was measured retrospectively and relied on autobiographical recall, which is reconstructive and susceptible to distortion, including the possibility that advertising itself shapes apparently personal memories (Braun, Ellis, & Loftus, 2002). Collecting confidence ratings and earliest memory descriptions partially addressed this, but did not eliminate it; future work could incorporate implicit or behavioural measures that are less dependent on conscious recollection (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012).

Third, all variables were self-reported within a single questionnaire, raising the possibility of common method bias inflating the observed associations; counterbalancing scale order mitigated but did not remove this concern, and multi-source or behavioural outcome measures (such as actual repurchase data) would strengthen future studies. Fourth, the sample was an opportunity sample skewed towards women and recruited online, limiting generalisability; the brand categories nominated were also predominantly food-related, and it remains to be seen whether the same mechanisms operate for durable goods, services, or digital brands. Finally, the study did not assess whether the focal brand was actually preferred in childhood, only that it was encountered then; as with mere-exposure accounts, the effect documented here concerns exposure rather than early preference. Cross-cultural replication would also be valuable, given evidence that cultural values shape brand memory and loyalty (Lam & Lee, 2005).

Conclusion

This exploratory study suggests that the loyalty advantage long attributed to early brand exposure is best understood as an indirect effect, realised through the nostalgic and identity-relevant meaning that childhood brands accumulate over time. Earlier exposure predicted greater adult loyalty, and this relationship was fully mediated, in parallel, by brand nostalgia and self-brand connection, while brand trust remained a strong but independent route to loyalty. The findings move beyond familiarity-based accounts by specifying *how* early experience translates into lasting commitment, and they carry clear ethical implications for the marketing of brands to children. Although the conclusions are constrained by the cross-sectional, self-report design, they offer a coherent psychological account of why the brands of childhood can retain such a powerful hold on the adult consumer, and they point towards longitudinal and implicit-measurement approaches as the most promising avenues for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of Questionnaire Measures

The items below are illustrative versions of those used, adapted from the cited sources. All scale items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) unless otherwise stated.

Brand Nomination and Age of Exposure

- "Please name one everyday brand that you first came across when you were a child and that you still use or buy today."
- "Roughly how old were you when you first came across this brand?" (open response, in years) • "How confident are you in that estimate?" (1 = *not at all confident* to 7 = *extremely confident*) • "Please briefly describe your earliest memory of this brand." (open text)

Brand Loyalty (adapted from Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)

- "I will buy this brand the next time I buy this type of product."
- "I intend to keep purchasing this brand."
- "I am committed to this brand."
- "I would be willing to pay more for this brand than for other brands."

Brand Nostalgia (adapted from Holbrook & Schindler, 2003; Kessous et al., 2015) • "This brand reminds me of good times in the past."

- "This brand brings back fond memories."
- "When I use this brand, I feel a sense of sentimental longing."
- "This brand makes me think of my childhood."
- "This brand connects me to my past."

Self-Brand Connection (adapted from Escalas & Bettman, 2003)

- "This brand reflects who I am."
- "I can identify with this brand."
- "I feel a personal connection to this brand."
- "I use this brand to communicate who I am to others."
- "This brand suits me well."
- "This brand says something true about me."
- "This brand is part of who I am."

Brand Trust (adapted from Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)

- "I trust this brand."
- "I rely on this brand."
- "This is an honest brand."
- "This brand is safe."

Appendix B: Ethics Statement

This study received approval from the relevant departmental research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, were free to withdraw without penalty, were assured of anonymity, and were fully debriefed on completion. The research adhered to the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics. No personally identifying information was retained, and data were analysed and reported only in aggregate.

Appendix C: Note on Data

The dataset and all statistics reported in this sample dissertation are simulated for the purpose of demonstrating dissertation structure, analytic procedure, and reporting conventions. They are internally consistent and realistic but do not represent a real data-collection exercise. Any resemblance of specific

figures to published findings is coincidental. 17