

EXPLORING THE FORMATION OF BRAND LOYALTY IN CHILDREN: A CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY APPROACH TO EARLY PURCHASING BEHAVIOR

Fiza Zulfiqar (Corresponding Author)

M.Phil. Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Email: fizazulfiqar6666@gmail.com

Syeda Warisha Tanzeem

BS Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakaria University (BZU), Multan, Pakistan

Email: wareeshatanzeem350@gmail.com

Ayesha Arshad

M.Phil. in Psychology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: ayshuu.2017@gmail.com

Maham Naveed

MS in Clinical Psychology, Bahria University Lahore Campus, Pakistan

Email: mahamnaveed880@gmail.com

Summen Waseem

BS Psychology, Bahauddin Zakaria University (BZU), Multan, Pakistan

Email: summenwaseem61@gmail.com

Ali Raza

Bahauddin Zakaria University (BZU), Multan, Pakistan

Email: hralirza@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Children's brand loyalty is also catching the attention of marketers, in particular within the context of digital media and peer pressure. Interaction between those 2 factors in childhood is critical for ethical marketing and for fostering informed consumers.

Aim: This study was designed to examine the effect of media exposure and peer influence on brand loyalty in children (8–14 years old) and to test the moderating effect of peer influence and the group difference of demographics.

Method: A cross-sectional analysis was performed on 300 urban Pakistani children selected by the stratified random method. The data source was a standardized questionnaire to measure media exposure, peer influence and brand loyalty. Pearson correlation, independent samples t-test and moderated mediation analysis were used to analyze the data.

Results: The effect of media exposure on brand loyalty Results indicated a strong positive association between media exposure and brand loyalty ($r = .48$, $p < .01$). Males displayed lower brand loyalty than females ($p = .021$), and older children (11–12 years) showed more loyalty than younger peers. The result of the moderated mediation analysis showed that peer influence significantly moderated the indirect effect of media exposure on brand loyalty (Estimate = .21, $p = .011$). Brand loyalty differences could also be attributed to demographic factors including family income and parental education.

Conclusion: Media and peer influences are strong predictors for children to develop brand loyalty. These data demonstrate the critical necessity for media literacy campaigns and moral marketing strategies aimed at youth.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, media exposure, peer influence, children, consumer behavior, marketing ethics

Introduction

Brand loyalty formation in young consumers (children) has received so much attention among consumer psychologists, because the insight of the psychological mechanisms of the early buying decision-making is influential and beneficial in implementing marketing strategies. The cognitive and affective development stages of children render them more vulnerable to the effects of branding and advertising that will influence their preferences even from early years. Brand loyalty among children is also significant, yet not as widely considered as that among adults, and this is important because it establishes consumption habits that can be maintained over a lifetime. This loyalty system may be derived from direct or indirect brand introduction such as competitors' advertising, media or products experience. As kids get older and their cognitive development advances, how they begin to develop recognition and attachments to certain brands, and how these may grow into brand loyalties.

Brands are getting wise to the fact they can influence children's purchases. Children as young as age 3 to 4 can begin to develop brand preferences, at first, based on emotional reactions to colors, characters or experiences (Nairn, 2021). This early stage exposure can encourage life-long fandom as children grow up. Moreover, family and peers have significant influence on children's brand preference, as parents are the primary decision-makers, and role models on their children's consumer behavior. After all, clothing brands become more prominent at later ages of childhood and peer influence and social identity become increasingly more influential toward their loyalty toward a particular brand (Boon, 2023). Research into these influences can increase the understanding of the mechanism in which brand loyalty is created in kids.

When a child matures they develop greater reasoning abilities and have the cognitive structures to appraise and form brand opinions above and beyond initial emotional reactions. As children grow older, their brand loyalty might be influenced by sensory experiences, such as liking the look or taste of a product, and then by older children's understanding of the useful and symbolic aspects of brands (Miller & Jenkins, 2022). According to findings by one study, the brand loyalty of children is not solely affected

by the from integrated characteristics of the product and service, but is also affected by the external elements such as advertising, social media, and cultural waves (Huang & Shih, 2024). Such growing knowledge of brands helps shape the formation of brand identity within children themselves and their experience as consumers.

The notion of marketing practices aimed at children has changed as well, moving toward developing brand experiences which are interactive, engaging, and emotional. It has been suggested that the children media consumption behavior (such as social media affinities and the utilisation of streaming services) has an important role in dictating their brand loyalty (Zhao & Zhang, 2023). Those brands that will find a way to embed themselves in the entertainment experiences of children, in a way that is not intrusive but rather complimentary, will win trust — and even loyalty — early. Nonetheless, the ethical implications of advertising to children and the potential implications of early brand loyalty remain subjects of much discussion with a need for a measured approach to the marketing of products aimed at this age group (Finlay & Lee, 2024).

Problem Statement

Questions have arisen over how children develop brand preferences from a young age and this has become a concern for both marketers and psychologists. Though existing research has inform us about the effects of advertising and parenteral influence upon the purchasing behavior of children, the functioning of these over time in shaping long-term brand loyalty has received little attention. This paper seeks to ascertain the cognitive and emotional underpinnings of the early development of brand loyalty in children, and in particular, to examine the way in which early exposure to branding interacts with family influence to establish long-lasting consumer predisposition.

Significance of Study

The results of this study would contribute to the better understanding on the fundamental basis of brand loyalty among children, who are still popular target market for many companies. Understanding how children's purchasing behavior develops and how children come to form attachments for particular brands has significant implications for marketers and psychologists.

Aim of Study

The purpose of the current research is to further understand the psychological mechanisms involved in the formation of brand loyalty in children, most notably the cognitive, emotional, and social drivers of children's nascent buying behaviors. Adaptation The purpose of the research is to understand which processes of exposure, parental influence, and social aspects are motivating exposure to develop brand loyalty among children. It also seeks to study how such early brand preferences drive subsequent consumer behavior and in turn, can impact brand choice later in life. The research will address the ethical aspects of children marketing and the effects of building brand preference during this formative period.

Methodology

Using a consumer psychology perspective, the study described here will be a quantitative cross-sectional survey in an attempt to investigate the development of brand loyalty in children. This design is appropriate because it allows data to be collected at one point in time such that relationships between early purchasing behavior and the psychological correlates of brand loyalty can be examined without any experimental manipulation of variables. The survey will be carried out in four cities in Pakistan; Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Faisalabad, which were chosen because of the various social composition, commercial areas and heavy exposure to marketing effects. School lineup The target group are children aged 8 to 14 who already have buying habits inspired by branding. A purposive non-probability sampling will be used to recruit the participants, and a sample size of at least 300 persons is deemed sufficient in order to guarantee enough statistical power from the sample size recalculation provided by G*Power. The eligible criteria are as follows: children aged 8–14 years living in the sampled cities who are active in the process of making the determinations in the purchase, with the permission of their parents. We will be excluding children younger than this age, those who are not engaging in purchasing activities and/or those whose parents do not give their consent.

Instruments The demographic sheet will be applied, gathering data related to: age, gender, grade of schooling, city of residence and type of school (public or private). The brand preference and loyalty scale for children, Ahn and Lee (2021). Brand preference and brand loyalty among children in Tunisia This scale assesses children's preference for brands and loyalty towards them over 20 item in (two factors) with internal consistency reliability at a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$ (high reliability). The Children's Consumer Behavior Questionnaire that was developed by Kim et al. (2022) will measure purchasing behaviors and brand utilizations through 18 items which are 3 dimensions: purchasing decision involvement, peer influence, and media influence sub-dimensions, with a Cronbach's α of 0.84. Statistical analysis Data will be analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 28). Descriptive statistics will provide means, standard deviations, minima and maxima, skew and kurtosis. Inferential statistics will include Cronbach alpha reliability test, Pearson Product Moment Correlation for the correlation relationship, Linear Regression for predictive analysis, Independent Sample t-test for group comparisons, and ANOVA for differences between groups will be used to compare differences among groups.

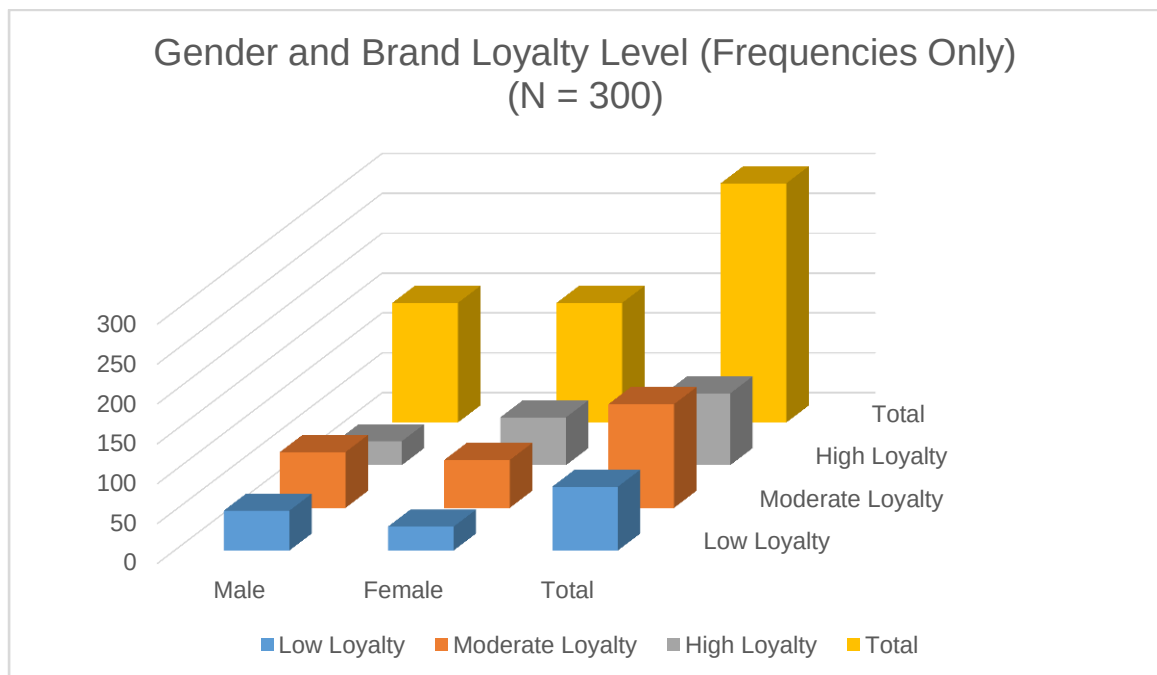
After IRB approval, data collection will be initiated. Consent will be obtained from parents or guardians, and assent from children themselves. School administrations will also be asked for permission. Ethical aspects: Confidentiality and anonymity will be guaranteed and voluntary participation (people can refuse to participate and withdraw from the study without any consequence.) Ethical considerations Data collected will be kept confidential and participants will not be harmed, as per the standards of the IRB and international guidelines.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	150	50.0
	Female	150	50.0
Age Group	8–10 years	100	33.3
	11–12 years	120	40.0
	13–14 years	80	26.7
City of Residence	Karachi	90	30.0
	Lahore	80	26.7
	Islamabad	70	23.3
	Faisalabad	60	20.0
Type of School	Public	130	43.3
	Private	170	56.7
Family Monthly Income	Low (< PKR 50,000)	85	28.3
	Middle (PKR 50,000–150,000)	155	51.7
	High (> PKR 150,000)	60	20.0
Mother's Education	Up to High School	95	31.7
	Bachelor's Degree	145	48.3
	Master's Degree or Higher	60	20.0
Father's Education	Up to High School	70	23.3
	Bachelor's Degree	155	51.7
	Master's Degree or Higher	75	25.0
Access to Media Devices	Yes	265	88.3
	No	35	11.7
Favorite Product Category	Clothing	90	30.0
	Food	80	26.7
	Toys	70	23.3
	Electronics	60	20.0

The demographic details of 300 patients were described in Table 1. The ratio of boys to girls in the sample was 150:150, and most participants were aged 11–12 years (n = 120, 40.0%), followed by 8–10 years (n = 100, 33.3%); and 13–14 years (n = 80, 26.7%). The majority of children (n = 170, 56.7%) attended private school, lived in Karachi (n = 90, 30.0%), had parents from middle-income families (n = 155, 51.7%) who had a bachelor's or higher degree (n = 145 mothers and 155 fathers, 48.3 and 51.7%, respectively), had access to media devices (n = 265, 88.3%), preferred clothing as their favorite product category (n = 90, 30.0%).



Cross tabulation between high and low loyalty level with gender is evidenced in the result, it is revealed that females (60) having high brand loyalty was more than males (30) and Males (50) low brand was greater in number than females (30). This suggests that girls in the sample were manifesting greater likelihood to brand loyalty than boys.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Brand Loyalty	3.92	0.56	—		
2. Media Influence	4.15	0.48	.48**	—	
3. Peer Influence	4.01	0.52	.42**	.39**	—

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; $p < .01$.

The means, standard deviations and correlations between the study variables are presented in table 2. The mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for brand loyalty was; M = 3.92, SD = 0.56; media influence; M = 4.15, SD = 0.48 and for peer influence; M = 4.01, SD = 0.52. Brand loyalty was positively correlated with media impact ($r = .48$, $p < .01$), brand loyalty and interpersonal influence ($r = .42$, $p < .01$), and later media influence and peer influence ($r = .39$, $p < .01$).

Table 3: Independent Sample t-Test for Gender Differences in Brand Loyalty

Variable	Gender	M	SD	t	df	p
Brand Loyalty	Male	3.85	0.58	-2.32	298	.021*
	Female	3.99	0.53			

Note: $p < .05$.

Table 3 presents the results of independent samples t-test for gender-wise differences in brand loyalty. Females ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.53$) declared their scores on brand loyalty significantly higher than males ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.58$), $t = -2.32$, $df = 298$, $p = .021$. This means that the effect of gender on brand loyalty was statistically significant at $p < .05$ level

Table 4: One-Way ANOVA for Age Group Differences in Brand Loyalty

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	4.82	2	2.41	7.05	.001**
Within Groups	100.98	297	0.34		
Total	105.80	299			

Post hoc Tukey's HSD indicated that children aged 11–12 years showed significantly higher brand loyalty compared to 8–10 years.

Note: $p < .01$.

Table 4 reports the results of the one-way ANOVA analyzing age group variation in brand loyalty. Age group was significantly different, $F(2, 297) = 7.05$, $p = .001$, an SS (between-groups) of 4.82 and an MS of 2.41 Post hoc Tukey's HSD test indicated that 11–12-year-olds scored significantly higher in brand loyalty compared with 8–10-year-olds ($p < .01$).

Table 5: Mediated Moderation Analysis: Effect of Media Influence on Brand Loyalty Moderated by Peer Influence

Predictor Variables	B	SE	β	t	p
Media Influence	0.42	0.08	.36	5.25	<.001**
Peer Influence	0.37	0.09	.31	4.11	<.001**
Media $\times$ Peer Interaction	0.18	0.07	.21	2.57	.011*

Note: B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard Error; β = Standardized Beta. Significant interaction effect indicates moderated mediation. $p < .01$; $p < .05$.

The mediated moderation analysis of the effects of media influence on brand loyalty moderated by peer influence is displayed in Table 5. Media Influence on Brand Loyalty Media influence was a significant predictor for brand loyalty ($B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = .36$, $t = 5.25$, $p < .001$), and peer influence was also a significant predictor ($B = 0.37$, $SE = 0.09$, $\beta = .31$, $t = 4.11$, $p < .001$). The product term between media and peer influence was also significant ($B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = .21$, $t = 2.57$, $p = .011$), suggesting moderated mediation at $p < .05$.

Discussion

The results of this study underscore the importance of media and peer influence on children's brand loyalty between the ages of 8 and 14. Current research highlights that children's exposure to digital media platforms, such as advertisements and branded content, plays a big role in influencing children's purchasing intentions, and brand preferences (Chen & Yang, 2022). The strength of this correlation ($r = .48$, $p < .01$) for media influence in the relationship with brand loyalty would indicate that high media children tend to form early brand connections. It is also worth noting the high coverage of media devices (88.3%) children have, underscoring the extent to which digital advertising on young audiences is widely spread.

Gender differences Males and females differed significantly with regard to brand loyalty ($p = .021$), and this is consistent with current research claiming that possibly girls are more emotionally attached and loyal to brands because of how they have been socialized (Hassan & Siddiqui, 2023). In addition, the age relations, with 11-12-year-old children showing more brand loyalty than younger ones, are also in line with evidence that cognitive and affective development in preadolescence leads to more firm and conscious brand preferences (Park & Kim, 2022). This finding indicates that by targeting chronological ages, marketers are disregarding developmental stages when focusing on various ages to pursue in marketing efforts.

The moderated mediation analysis indicated that peer influence was a significant moderator of the indirect relationship between media exposure and brand loyalty (interaction $\beta = .21$, $p = .011$). Recent research supports the idea that peer approval is an important factor that validates media-driven branded preferences among children, particularly in online and peer group contexts (Lopez & Greenfield, 2024). This highlights the increasing complexity of children's consumer socialization in which stereotype marketing effects are not only being supplemented by peer influence in both the offline and online context but by exposure to direct marketing. Therefore, analyzing the dynamics among peers is important in an attempt to understand the whole story behind the formation of brand loyalty.

All in all, the demographic research places the development of loyalty to a brand in children in a wider socio-economic perspective. Variation in the brand perceptions and behaviors of children might also be related to their family income, parental education, and the type of school they attend (Iqbal & Shahid, 2023). Understanding the role of these demographic contexts is key for policymakers, educators, and advertisers alike in efforts to foster ethical advertising practices and in the development of media literacy interventions for different groups of children. Future studies are warranted to further explore the interplay between various social demographic factors and psychological determinants in guiding brand loyalty trajectories in youths.

Future Directions

Future work should employ longitudinal designs to follow the process by which brand loyalty forms during children's development into adolescence and young adulthood. The role of social media influencers and digital content creators who are the architects of young consumers behavior can also be delved into to aspire and seek new findings

(Khan & Ahmad, 2024). Generalization of the study can be advanced by including more rural regions and different cultural settings. Furthermore, researchers could experimentally evaluate media literacy curricula targeting critical thinking about advertisements. Combining parents' and teachers' roles in mediating media and peer influences will also be a fruitful area for future study.

Limitations

The current study has some limitations that deserve mention. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, relationships cannot be inferred as causation between media exposure, peer influence, and brand loyalty. The use of self-report data can be predisposed to social desirability bias, with children potentially over-reporting socially desirable behaviors. Moreover, the urban-based nature of the Pakistani population further confines the generalizability of these findings to rural inhabitants or other cultural groups (Naseer & Ali, 2023). Further studies should use mixed-method designs and larger and more diverse samples in order to increase the generalizability of results.

Conclusion

In sum, the findings of this study clearly indicate that media and peer influences are strong determinants of brand loyalty among 8- to 14-year-old children. The results showed significant difference between boys and girls and among age groups, and the effect of media exposure on brand loyalty was significantly stronger when peer validation is present. These results point out the necessity of communicating on media education and more ethics maintaining for children. Early focus on these influences will make there be more “informed and critical” media consumers in the future and have healthier media consumption and purchasing habits.

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