Brands, Mascots and Children
A Qualitative approach

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BRANDS, MASCOTS AND CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

ABSTRACT

The paper explores theoretically and empirically the brand and the mascot concept among children. Group interviews were conducted to examine the children's associations to those concepts. The data analysis was organized according to a circular frame (the *circept* frame), which allowed a content analysis based on a sequence of analogical concepts. Children's answers suggest that the concept of brand is apprehended by children of 6/8 years old, furthermore, that children of this age have skills to separate the brand from the product concept and described it as a source of guarantee, of identification and of promises vehicle. As far as mascots perception is concerned, children's answers show that they are an important way to develop the relationships between children and brands.

KEY WORDS: Brands, mascots, children, associations

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays children are seen as a powerful and attractive market segment, both by the marketing practitioners, and the academy (Pecheaux & Derbaix, 1999); they have a strong economic impact on the society and perform a tough influence at the level of their parents' consumption (McNeal, 1992). In this perspective, it is more and more relevant to realise the way children know and develop their relation with brands (Ji, 2002). The purpose of the study is precisely at this level, trying to understand how children understand brands and one of the most relevant brand signs in the children segment, the mascots. Empirical studies, specifically related to what the brand represents for children and specific about mascot, are undoubtedly scarce (Mizerski, 1995; Difraza, 1991; Fischer, 1991; Ji, 2002).

CHILDREN AND THE BRANDS

In one of the pioneer studies in this field, Guest (1942) observed that children between 7 and 8 years old are aware of a high number of brand names. Before learning to read,

children are already capable of recognising packages and brands (Haynes, 1993). At pre-school age, children reveal competences to remember names of brands, mainly if visual clues are supplied, such as colours, images or mascots (Macklin, 1996). The privileged use of imagistic representations by children supports the idea that the brand visual elements will be the first elements perceived by the child. In a study with children of 6/11 years old, to whom was asked to draw the packages of the cereals they knew, Rossiter (1975) demonstrated that children retain more easily the brand visual elements, such as the colours and figures, than they do with names. Concerning the capacity of children to associate the visual signals to the correspondent product, Zuckerman and Gianino (1981), from a study carried out with children of 4/10 years old, concluded that children demonstrate a highly precocious capacity of perfectly associating the brand mascot to the correspondent product. Brée and Cegarra (1994) highlighted the privileged position of the brand mascot as an element of differentiation of brands before children. As far as memorising of the different clues is concerned, according to Zangh and Sood (2002), children of 2/7 years old tend to focus on concrete clues, and from that age on, they develop the capacity of focusing on more stimuli and more associated with the functionality of the products.

Studies summed up above mainly demonstrate the structural knowledge of brands (John, 1999). They also reflect the brand and its signs awareness and the association to the product category they belong to. However, as children grow up, they develop a symbolic knowledge of brands, that is, they start to realise the dimension of the symbolic consumption and the status associated to brands and to different products (Belk, Bahn & Mayer, 1982). From the age of 8, children demonstrate a clear preference for certain brands, based on a more sophisticated knowledge of brands and their images (Achnreiner, 1995).

MASCOTS

Mascots as a brand sign and often as a declination of the logo are fundamental in its differentiation, especially in the children segment (Henderson & Cote, 1998). It is of utmost importance to explain the distinction between a set of notions with close meaning and not unanimously used in the literature. In fact, some authors use the "brand character" denomination (Brée and Cegarra, 1994; Keller, 1998; Aaker, 2000 and Hill, 2002), others speak of "cartoon trade character" (Mizerski, 1995) and others talk about "spokespersons" (Tom et al, 1992; Misra & Beatty, 1990). In fact, the

character typology is exceptionally varied (Mizerski, 1995; Montigneaux, 2002; Pecheaux and Derbaix, 1999), but the categorisation of a typology is still incipient. Mizerski (1995) refers that the typology of characters is especially vital, in so far as its influence in children may be significantly different. Nevertheless, the author does not suggest any categorisation. In the scope of this study and considering the work of Tom et al (1992), we understand that the brand characters may be celebrities (Michael Jordan) or characters created by the brand. As far as the created characters are concerned, they might be people (Betty Crocker) or they might be imaginary, which we will define as mascots. Concerning the mascots and the imaginary, they might be humanoids (M&M), animals (Tony by Frosties) or products (Chiquita Banana). This taxonomy is represented in **figure 1**. In the scope of this study, the analysis is centred in the importance of the mascots among children, of its concept, of their various types and of its influence. Mascots, being a created character, have several advantages towards celebrities. First, when a character is created, marketeers have the autonomy of creating its individual characteristics, whereas celebrities already include certain features, which do not allow manipulation. Second, marketeers may specifically draw features with various attributes for the created characters. Third, whereas celebrities often represent more than one brand, the created characters are conceived to represent only one single brand or even one single product. One of the principles of efficiency of the characters depends on its consistency with the product(s) represented. This consistency is commonly superior when the mascot is created. Brand mascots represent a special type of signals, particularly important in the children segment, as they allow children to establish an emotional bond with the brand, and because, simultaneously, they enhance its memorisation (Brée and Cegarra, 1994; Keller, 1997; Mizerski, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

This investigation uses the individual as an analysis unit. This factor has various implications in terms of methodology. This is even more relevant, when the subject of analysis, beyond being individual, consists in children, as it is the case in this study. The analysis was performed with children of primary school (6-8 years old). These children belong to the concrete operational stage (7/11 years old) in psychology (Piaget, 1972) and as far as the socialisation level is concerned, they belong to the analytical stage (7/11 years old) (John, 1999), allowing some variation in terms of age limits, so as to

reduce the number of analysed stages (Roedder and John, 1986; John, 1999). At this age, children possess a larger knowledge of the market, a more complex knowledge of advertisement concepts and brands, and a new perspective that overrides their own feelings and motivations.

According to Hill et al (1996) there are two methods used in the approach of children: focus group and individual interviews. Focus group is one of the adequate methods, as it gives confidence to children in the scope of the group, allowing them to participate actively (Miles & Huberman, 1994). When children compose the target group, the ideal dimension of the focus group is of 4/6 children (Hill et al, 1996) which, according to some authors, is named mini focus group (Krueger, 1998). A mini group gathers 4 to 6 participants for an approximately 1-hour meeting. Its reduced number allows a more flexible animation, which is rather pertinent when dealing with children. Groups were composed by 4/5 children with 45-minute meetings. Two groups for each age level were considered, which implied six focous groups (29 children, 62% boys distributed by the ages of 6, 7 and 8) during three consecutive days. Ethically aware (Ahuja, 2001), permission was obtained for each one of the children parents before participation in the focous group. At playgrounds, children were invited to participate in the session, and they were informed that those sessions would include some games and images watching. Children that demonstrated interest in participating left the playground, gathered by the teachers and taken to a room. Should children show any kind of discomfort, visual or verbal, he/she would immediately leave the room. Only one child left the room before the session was over.

DATA ANALYSES

An analysis based on audiotaping and notes from the focous group was carried out. This approach implied to watch the tapes of each group and then transcribe the most important parts of the discussion. Four and a half hours of meetings were transcribed and two types of interpretation were carried out: an ideographic analysis and an across person analysis, both according to grounded theory procedures (Strauss &Corbin, 1990). The ideographic analysis was based on a deep analysis of the transcriptions, followed by the identification of various behaviour types and trends. The second level of the interpretation's objective (across person analyses) was to find out various behaviour patters so as to structure and understand the concept of brand and of mascots

before children (Fournier, 1998). Some techniques were used to increase data confidence (Earlondson, 1993). Two colleagues revised the transcriptions and the analyses of the interpretation summaries. The more delicate data analysis was organised according to *circumplex frame* (Fustier&Debrinay, 1979) which allowed a graphic representation of data, as shown below.

RESULTS: BRANDS TO CHILDREN

All the qualifiers used by children related to the brand were considered. They were taken from the two main questions of the discussion semi-structured script. The first question was based on images connected with cereal packages and the figure of a known mascot, asking the child to observe and comment. In the second question, children were asked what brands are. Data analysis was carried out according to a technique based on the research of bipolar axes whose function is to organize contradictory claims associated to the concept of brand. It is obvious that a word is nothing but an incomplete and not perfect description of the reality it represents (Gordon & Wendy, 2002). Behind each word and each object there is a diffusion of emotions. Reality is obtained only if we gather the consciousness and the subconscious and if the concept is characterized taking the emotions transmitted into account (Bagozzi, 2000). It is in this perspective that the *circept* method becomes relevant, in so far as using a circular grid of bipolar conceptual axes; it gathers a rich set of information, established at an emotional level, to describe an object. No theoretical presentation of the method will be displayed, as it will be understood with its direct application. In its initial stage, qualifiers describing the same type of attitude are categorized. In our study, the first important idea transmitted by most of the children concerning the brands was that brands are necessary ("everything has to be branded"), but on the other hand, other children consider brands to be accessories ("not everything has to be branded, it depends"). This is the first bipolar axe, **figure 2**. Brands may be necessary or accessory; these are two different perspectives for the same concept, although none of them expresses a negative connotation towards the brand. What might be negative concerns the excesses associated to each one of these concepts: an excessively needed brand may become enslaving, an excessively accessory brand may become superfluous. If the bipolar axes are complemented with these extreme positions, which somehow represent the perversions of the positive associations, we obtain the representation shown in **figure 3**. Identically, data were acutely analyzed, and at the end

four bipolar axes were found, which cover the children' dominant statements, as demonstrated in **figure 4**. At this stage, the necessary bases exist to present the graphic representation of the various axes. **Figure 5** represents the circular structure that commands the axes considering its conceptual analogy[4] (Fustier & Debrinay, 1979) . The circular analysis of the figure allows the observation of several successive analogies leading to the opposite of the initial concept. As observed in the following figure, brands may be necessary, truthful and therefore expensive; they can be fun and consequently accessory, discrete; they can represent a good exchange (value for money) and therefore they are serious and necessary. After representing the brand *circumplex*, it is fundamental to define the brand profile observed in the children, elaborated from the frequency of each concept associated to the various dialectic axes[5]. The blue line at the edge of the *circept* corresponds to the frequency of the positive statements; the area represented by the red, broken line represents the negative statements, **figure 6**. Brands are necessary true and expensive in children's opinion. In this study, children see the brands as something necessary, inherent to the market and fundamental to identify the offer: "everything has to be branded", "there is nothing without brand". The perception of brands as something trustworthy may be shown in the relation children establish with brands: "I know that everything branded Nike is good, for example, I have already had sneakers of other brands, and Nike's don't compare, they are much better". Brands are expensive: this association shows the dimension of the symbolic knowledge of brands (John, 1999) showing brands as somewhat at the level of dreams: "When I am a grown up I want to drive a Jeep as my father does, but as it is an expensive brand, it has to be when I am really old". Less frequent but important, is the fact that for some children brands represent fair value for money: "there are brands which are good and not expensive, as Zara, for instance". In the shadows, in the scope of the less favorable associations, some children see the brands as fake, deceiving, and that do not keep what they promise: "some times things are branded and are not good".

RESULTS: MASCOTS TO CHILDREN

To study what mascots represent for children, a similar analysis as described above was carried out concerning brands. The first key idea concerns the fact that for most of the

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[4] Changing the original version of the circept frame and in a way that it enhances the positive concepts in the first analysis, they were placed outside the axes and the negative concepts, in bold, were placed in its inside.
[5] In the circept, (0) represents the indifference point, (+) represents the total acceptance of the positive association and (–) the total acceptance of the negative associations.

children, mascots are "cartoons". For others, mascots may be half men half cartoons. The first bipolar axe resulted from this point, cartoons *versus* humanoids. In the limit of these two trends, the mascot may be found as "something that does not exist" (fictitious), an abstraction or on the contrary a mascot that does not serve to play "a person[6]". In the table of **figure 7** the three bipolar axes found may be analysed. Based on the axes, as in the case of the brand concept, the graphic *circumplex* representation was elaborated (**figure 8**).

From the frequency of the different associations, the mascots profile type before children were identified, as shown in **figure 9**. Mascots are cartoons, funny, amusing, tender, that might be half men, half cartoon. As observed, mascots do not origin a lot of negative associations. The association of human features to non-human stimuli is analysed under various perspectives. In fact, the human activity of anthropomorphise inanimate objects is common to almost all societies. The animism theories suggest that there is a feeling of necessity of anthropomorphising objects so as to facilitate interaction (Nida & Smalley, 1959 in Fournier, 1998). This idea was expressed several times as in statements like "I like the cartoons with eyes, hands, nose, so that we can speak to them". Brands may not act, think or feel, however mascots contribute for them to become "alive". Mascots may be tender and they may be funny. When we accept this behavioural dimension to which mascots are associated, we necessarily reinforce the relation between children and the brands.

STUDY LIMITS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The conclusions of this study require some caution in terms of the generalisation of the results due to some factors. First, due to the dimension and the contents of the sample, and due to the qualitative analysis elaborated. However and according to Gordon (2002) the statistical validity, the confidence levels and the adequate samples are little related to the way humans retain the meaning of brands. Statistics do not render the information obtained more real (in the sense that they reflect in a more precise way how the brand is retained) than the qualitative appreciation of the brand, the metaphors, the analogies, the descriptions and the constructions. They only become more or less capable of being generalised. Second, at the level of the data interpretation, the credibility and the validity of children's answers have to be taken into consideration. Several authors

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[6] In this particular case, a mascot that is a person, is, from the marketing point of view, a character, not considered a mascot any more (Gail et al, 1992). In this sense, it may be considered a negative association.

suggest that children may be highly influenced and thus their answers may be deceiving. This problem may have occurred in this study. Lastly, the defined dialectic axes do not have a normative character; the primary objective is the data representation and its systematisation. Thus, other dimensions could have been considered for the setting of the dialectic axes.

Despite these limitations, the study presents some relevant contributions for the relation between brands and the consumers, in this case children. It demonstrated that the concept of brand is apprehended by children of 6/8 years old. Despite the first reaction by children on the question "what is a brand" being the enumeration of several brands of different categories of products. They then revealed skills to separate the brand from the product concept and described it as a source of guarantee, of identification and of promises vehicle. We observed that children discuss brands in a way that is dominated by images and by the values associated to it. Results demonstrate that brands are part of the children daily life, that brands help them and give them security. As far as mascots perception is concerned, contrary to verbal signs (name and slogan) and the more abstract visual signals (example: scriptural logos), they are an imaginary representation that does not demand from children another answer except its perception. Children consider mascots to be their friends, so they are an imaginary representation of brands integrating both their physical reality (the products they offer) and their psychic reality (they are friendly, tender and funny).

As far as mascots are concerned, and considering their anthropomorphic character, they allow the considerable improvement of brand communication with children. Last, it's worthy of notice the possibility to develop a quantitative research, carried out by the dialectic axes that compose the brand and the mascots *circumplex*. The bipolar axes represented in figures 3 and 6 may be transformed into attitude scales, allowing the quantification of the brand and the mascots concept among children.

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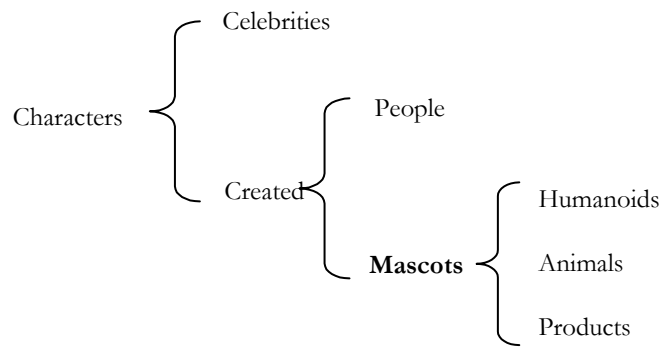
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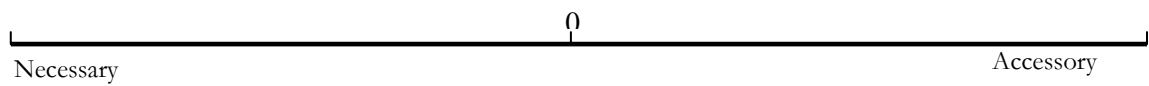
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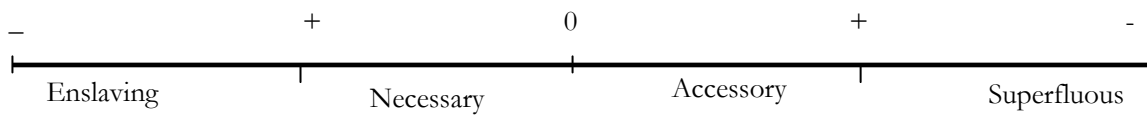
Appendixes

Figure 1
Taxonomy of Brand Characters

Characters
- Celebrities
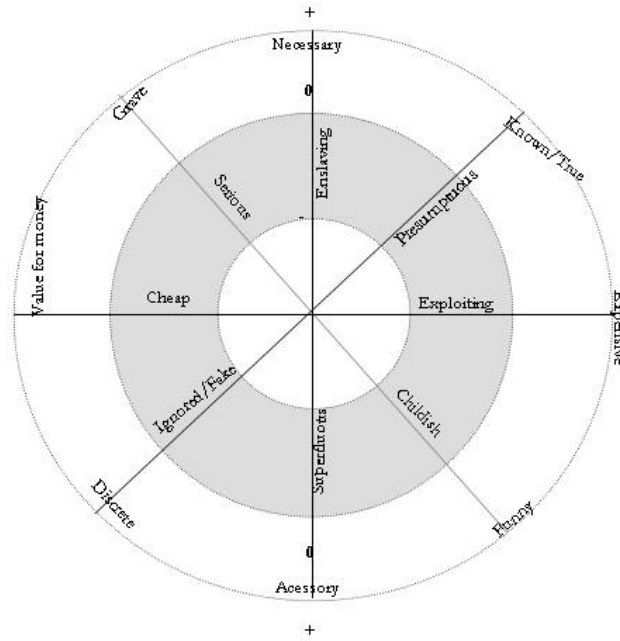- Created
  - People
  - **Mascots**
    - Humanoids
    - Animals
    - Products

Figure 2

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                              0
|—————————————————————————————|—————————————————————————————|
Necessary                                              Accessory
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Figure 3

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_              +              0              +              -
|——————————————|——————————————|——————————————|——————————————|
  Enslaving        Necessary       Accessory       Superfluous
```

Figure 4
The brand understood by children: dialectic axes
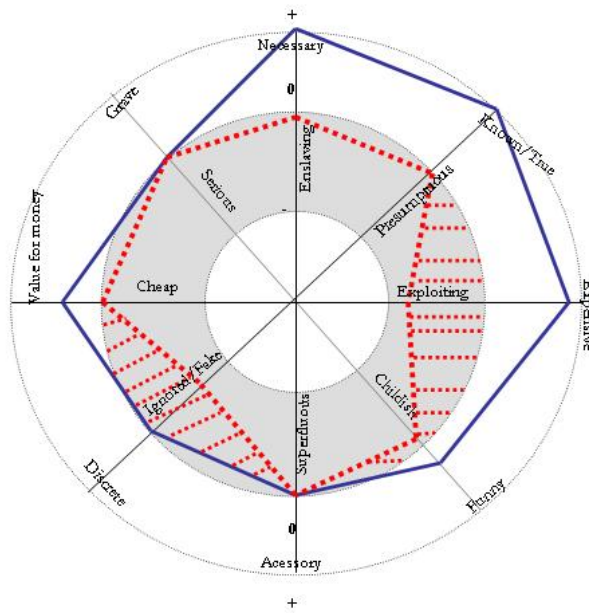
-	+	+	-
Enslaving (1)[7] - If it is unbranded it doesn't exist, tell me something without a brand name? (1)	**Necessary (19)** - Brands are important for us to know what things are (8) - Everything must be branded (4) - It is important that things are branded (5) - I wouldn't like something unbranded, not without a brand (2)	**Accessory (4)** - Not everything has to be branded, it depends on things (3) - I don't even know if some products are branded, like toilet paper (1)	**Superfluous (0)**
Childish (1) - Some brands are only for babies, they have childish cartoons (1)	**Funny (7)** - I think branded things are funnier, they're more amusing (2) - Brands animate things, they have colours, symbols, cartoons (3) - I think that brand ads are funny (2)	**Serious (0)**	**Grave (0)**
Exploiting (8) - There are some very, very expensive brands (4) - We can buy very expensive brands and in the end they're not good (2) - Some things are branded only to be more expensive (2)	**Expensive (20)** - Good things are branded and expensive (3) - The best selling brands are the most expensive (2) - Good brands are expensive (4) - Nike stuff is expensive, like sneakers or football clothing (5) - Nokia mobile phones are good and expensive because they are branded (6)	**Value for Money (2)** - Not all the expensive brands are good, Zara is not expensive but it's good (2)	**Cheap (1)** - It's like F.C.Porto's clothing, in fairs the t-shirts are fake, that's why they're cheap (1)
Presumptuous (0)	**Known/True (14)** - An unbranded gameboy is a fake (3) - I like Nike because it is a truthful brand, not a fake (8) - Known brands are truthful brands (3)	**Discrete (2)** - There are some very good brands that are still unknown! (2)	**Ignored/Fake (5)** - I don't like to receive fake Barbies from my Mother (1) - Brands are fake in fairs (3) - There are not branded things in fairs, they're all fakes (1)

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[7] The numbers indicated in brackets correspond to the number of quotations made to describe each category of the content analysis representing the bipolar axes of the *circept*. Therefore, there were 85 pertinent occurrences, leading to the creation of twelve categories.

Figure 5
Brand´s Circepto

Figure 6
Brand´s Profile

Figure 7
Mascots understood by children: dialectic axes

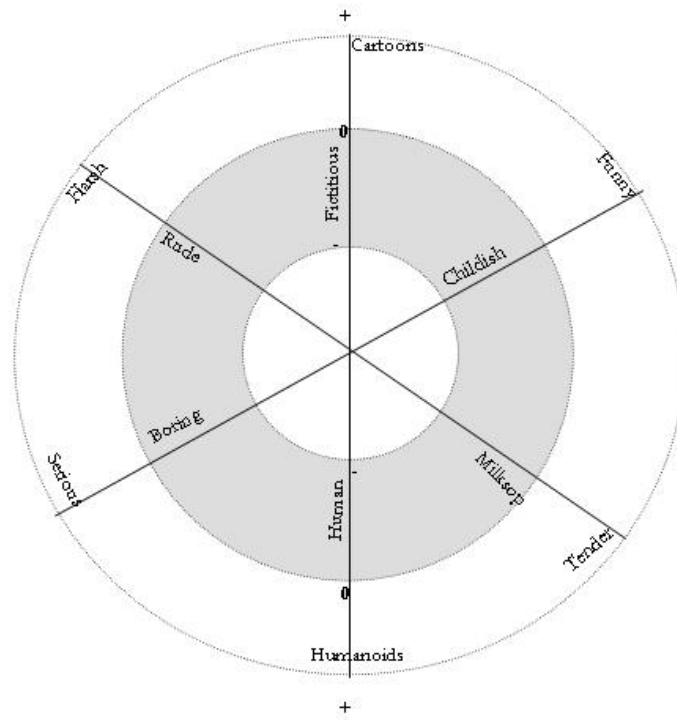| -	+	+	-
Fictitious (1) - Mascots don't exist (1)	**Cartoons (19)** - They are cartoons (9) - I wouldn't like to see the packages without cartoons (2) - They are cereal and yoghurt cartoons (4) - I prefer the fat cartoons, they're nicer (4)	**Humanoids (8)** - Mascots are half cartoon half human (6) - I like cartoons very much because we can talk with them, because they see, move, eat and answer to us (1) - I can talk and dance with them (1)	**People (2)** - I know other mascots but they're not cartoons, they're people (1) - They only make sense if they have eyes, arms, legs, if they look like real people (1)
Childish (2) - Some of them are so stupid, they're only for babies like my brother (2)	**Funny (11)** -Cartoons are funny (3) -They are cute, amusing, they laugh (3) - Some cartoons are very funny (2) - Some game cartoons play with us and amuse us (1) - Some cartoons in the ads are funny, like that one that scores in the basket three times (…) (2)	**Serious (2)** - They support things. They are symbols, they are very important to the companies (1) - I know other mascots but they're not cartoons (1)	**Boring (0)**
Milksop (1) - Only little babies like those cartoons (1)	**Tender (10)** - The cartoons are kind, cosy (7) - Many of them can even sleep with us, they're very cute (2) - I've heard about them, it's something we like a lot and we can keep them (1)	**Harsh (0)**	**Rude (1)** - Some mascots are mean (1)

Figure 8
Mascot´s Circepto

Figure 9
Mascot´s Profile