Does Gender matters when we think about brand Mascots?

Introduction

This paper aims to increase the understanding of the impact of the children´s gender on the children´s attitudes toward brand mascots. Past research of children´s marketing strategies shows that children gender is very prevalent, yet the potential impact of the gender on children´s attitudes toward brands has received very little attention. To address this gap in the literature, this paper develops a conceptual framework based on a synthesis of developmental psychology and brand mascots literature, to understand to what extent children´s gender causes different levels of mascot´s recognition and affection.

It is found based on HOMALS analysis, that the different design characteristics associated with the universal design principles (abstraction, figurativity, symmetric, asymmetric, round and angular forms) stimulated different levels of recognition and affection; and that recognition is more discriminating than the affection, regarding gender´s responses.

Model

Considering that the mascot is one of the most relevant brand signs in the children's segment, it seems crucial to understand what type of attitudes children establish with the different typologies of mascots associated to different design characteristics. The model presented has the individual as the analysis unit, which determine the low number of highly explainable variables. This perspective allows that the future results are to be determined by variables controlled in the investigation.

Method

The paradigm of the investigation was predominantly positivist, intending a uniformity of relations between the form of the behaviour and its meaning, so as to allow an adequate operationalisation of the variables, objectivity, replicability e causality (Bryman, 1984; Erickson, 1986). In this study, we applied a highly frequent method in the domain of the experimental aesthetics, where the main empirical studies on design appear. Henderson and Cote (1998), also applied this method in the study carried out on the selection and modification of logos, thus validating its use on the domain of the strategies of the brand signs.

Independent Variables

In order to select the design characteristics, in a first stage, the study was based on the characteristics analysed in the investigation of Henderson and Cote (1998): natural, representative, organic, harmonious, balanced, symmetric, elaborated, complex, active, depth, parallel, repetition, proportion and round. So as to avoid an experimental device excessively complex, the graphic dimensions based on the contradictory binary relations were reduced. According to the logic construction of semantic categories and of the structural semiotics (Floch,

1989), three semantic categories were created: abstract vs figurative; symmetric vs asymmetric and round vs angular. On the conceptual point of view, the semantic categories allow the comparison of two comparable terms, ensuring the exactness of the analysis. On the experimental point of view, they allow the definition of the stimuli and the verification of its relevancy on the recognition level (short and long term) (Floch, 1989, 2002).

Dependent Variables: Attitude

Attitude appears in several studies as a central variable of various models of consumer behaviour. However, defining and evaluating attitudes implies an approach with several perspectives. To some authors, attitudes are seen with affect, measured from indicators of emotions and attitudes (Cohen & Areni, 1991). Other authors, with a more limited perspective, define attitudes as judgements, positive or negative evaluations of a specified object; Some don't even differentiate affect from judgement (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993); Another group of authors defines attitude based on two dimensions, the affectiveate and the cognitive. In this research, the cognitive dimension will be evaluated according to the recognition indicator; the affect dimension will be evaluated based on a facial scale applied by Mizerski (1995).

Methodology

The sample consists in 575 children, 51% boys and 49% girls divided by the four years of primary school (25% children from the 1st year, 6 years old, 24% seven years old from second year pupils, 27% 8 years old from the 3rd year and 24% 9 years old from the 4$^{th\ year}$). According to the number of stimuli and of the variables, and according to studies already carried out in the scope of the experimental aesthetic, we made use of the definition of the multiple samples, each one to test each mascot.

Experimental support

The effort of neutralisation of the effect history has limited us to the creation of fictitious mascots, as each prototype is associated with a certain factor of memorisation and affective. Furthermore, to each of the experimental groups, only one stimulus was presented, in order to avoid the effects of learning.

Procedure

The data collection was carried out for three months by a team of graduates supervised by the researcher. They were trained in the interview techniques and in the ethical principles inherent to investigation before children, and they were not aware of the propositions of the investigation. Every child was interviewed individually.. After a short warm up conversation, an A4 size card was shown with six images of mascots. Of the six mascots, only one concerned the object of the study. Each child looked for 4 seconds to the card. After, a 15-minute entertainment activity was held. After this period, a new card was shown with 6 mascots, in which the mascot under study was repeated and five new mascots were added. At this moment, each child was asked "did you

see any of these cartoons in the previous card?". This process allows for an immediate measure of recognition. After a week, a new card was shown, keeping the mascot under study and adding 5 other entertainment mascots. At this moment, each child was asked "last week, did you see any of these cartoons?". This process has provided us with the data for the long-term recognition. In order to test de affection, it was presented to each child a A4 size card with one mascot and the facial scale applied by Mizerski (1995) with four levels.

Results

The data analysis proceeds in two steps. The first one investigates the direct impact of the mascot's design characteristics on the recognition and affection level among the children. This evaluation starts with the performance of chi-square independence test that confirms (1) the existence of significant dependence relationship between the short term and long term recognition; (2) short term recognition and the type of the stimulus; (3) long term recognition and school grade; (4) affection and the type of the stimulus; (5) affection and school grade. The nature of these relations was than identified and described through the application of a homogeneity analysis (HOMALS[1]). In the second analytical step a cluster analysis were applied to validate the HOMALS results and also to define groups of children considering their affection and recognition answer to the different type of mascot's design characteristics.

With regard to affection, we can conclude based on the perceptual map, that the first dimension distinguishes essentially the preference levels associated with years of schooling; while the second dimension, the main difference found between preference levels are associated with the type of mascot. That is, no significant differences between boys and girls. With regard to recognition, dimension 1of the perceptual map essentially distinguishes levels of recognition associated with the different type of stimulus; dimension 2, distinguishes the gender and the type of stimulus.

In this perspective we can assume that the children´s gender impact is more evident at the mascot´s recognition level than at mascot´s affection answer.

Study contributions and future research

[1] Homals is a technique developed by American researchers of the University of Leiden, in the early years of the 1990s. The goal of this tool is to analyze the relationships between the categories of a set of nominal variables. Through the application of a mathematical algorithm, HOMALS transforms the input categorical data so that an optimal quantification is attributed to each category (named the category quantification) and te each individual observation (named the object score). A fundamental characteristic oh HOMALS is that it allows to present the results geometrically, that is, as points within a low-dimensional space denominated perceptual map (Clausen, 1998; Geer, 1993)

At the level of the fundamental investigation, the study intends to improve the knowledge of mascots within the context of management and brand communication. Considering that the mascot is one of the brand signs more frequently used in the children's segment, the creation of a typology will be a strong contribution to its analysis and definition. On the other hand, given that companies make significant investments in an effort to reach children with various brand tactics, understanding the type of answers regarding children´s gender may help marketing managers reach young consumers more effectively.

A conceptual framework, such as the one presented in this paper, poses rich opportunities for future research. One starting point is to replicate the empirical findings of this study to provide further support for the framework. Certainly the moderation effect of gender answers deserves further attention.

Another issue may be that the manipulations of mascot´s design characteristics could be not strong enough to evoke children´s gender schemas when processing the brand mascots. Then, the design characteristics of the mascots could be different and it is important to discover if the results became the same.

Future research is also needed to examine the relationship between gender and age. This research was limited to a very narrow range of ages. Analysing the results for different age groups will provide critical information for practitioners in the development of children´s brand mascots.

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