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ABSTRACT

The paper explores theoretically and empirically the brand concept among children. Group interviews were conducted to examine the children's associations to this concept. 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.

KEY WORDS: Brands, children, associations

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OBJECTIVE

Nowadays children are seen as a powerful and attractive market segment, both by the marketing practitioners, and the academy (Pechaux & 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. Empirical studies, specifically related to the concept of brand, to what the brand represents for children are undoubtedly scarce (Mizerski, 1995; Difraza, 1991; Fischer, 1991; Ji, 2002).

CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT BRANDS

To children and brands are probably the most relevant elements of the market. Children get information connected with the market through observation and participation (accidental learning) and instruction (Ward, 1974). In one of the pioneer studies in this domain, Guest (1942) observed that children between 7/8 years old know a large number of brand names. Even before learning how to read, they can already recognize the packaging and the brands (Haynes, 1993). Before entering school children show some skills to remember brand names, mainly after receiving visual clues like colours, images or mascots (Macklin, 1996). As children grow up the brand awareness increases. On one hand, the improving ability of children to retain brand names is directly associated to their age, on the other hand brand awareness is first developed in the products related to children, like cereals, snacks and toys and, later on, to products connected with adults (John, 1999). Almost all the studies mention the existence of a multiplicity of cognitive processes and/or representation systems that children adopt in order to develop their knowledge over brands, products and consumption situations. The ability of children to

memorise brands implies cognitive operations that differ according to the polymorph nature of the brand signs. The nature of brand signs is multiple they can be verbal, like the brand names slogans, visual like the mascots, brands are multiple, they can be of verbal nature, like the brand name or the slogan, of visual nature, like the logos or the mascots, or even musical like the jingles. The memorisation of these different types of information depends on the representation systems that children use during their cognitive and verbal development. There is a consensus expressed in the literature that states the fact that the register of the image components of the brand doesn't demand other cognitive skills than the analogical processing associated to perception. These representations make reference to the information register based on its physical expression, that is, from its visual characteristics (Richard, 1990). Children favour the use of image representations, and this fact sustains the idea that the visual elements of the brand will be the first elements understood by children. In a study conducted with children from 6 to 11 years old, to whom it was requested to draw the cereal packages that they knew, Rossiter (1975) showed that children retain mainly the visual brand elements, like colours and illustrations, more than the names. According to this author, the brand name is an important recognition sign, but it is intimately connected to the children's age and to the development of their verbal memory. The progressive learning of reading represents an essential acquisition at the level of brand recognition. As far as the children's capacity to associate the visual signs to the respective product is concerned, Zuckerman and Gianino (1981), from a study with 4 to 10 year old children, concluded that they show very precocious capacities to associate perfectly the brand mascot to the product. Kapferer (1985) also focused the importance of visual signs at the level of brand recognition in children (to whom Yoplait is, above all, the flower yoghurt). Brée and Cegarra (1994) focused the privileged position of the brand mascot as an element of brand differentiation among children. When memorising different clues, according to Zangh and Sood (2002), children between 2 and 7 years old tend to focus on concrete clues, and, from that specific age, they develop the skill of focusing in more stimuli associated to the functionality of the products. The studies above mentioned reflect the structural knowledge of the brands (John, 1999). They also reflect the brand and its signs' awareness and the association to the product category they belong to. However, during their growth, children develop a symbolic brand knowledge, that is, they begin to understand the dimension of symbolic consumption and the status associated to the brands and to the different products (Belk, Bahn & Mayer, 1982). From their eighth year of age, children show a clear preference for some brands, based on a more sophisticated knowledge of brands and their images (Achnreiner, 1995). In the context of this symbolic brand knowledge, Ji (2002) studied the type of relation that children establish with brands, focusing the importance of understanding what the brand means to this segment, strengthening the theoretical frame in this domain. The main principle to establish the relation of children with brands is hearing the child refer the brand name and its category (structural

knowledge of the brand). Beyond that, the child must be able to express the past situations in which he or she interacted with the brand and its daily importance (symbolic knowledge of the brand) (Ji, 2002). According to this author, from the definition of some metaphors, it is possible to identify ten types of relations between children and brands: “first love”, “true love”, “fixed marriage”, “secret admirer”, “good friends”, “best buddies”, “old acquaintances”, “acquaintances”, “one night stand” and “enemies”.

THE BRAND CONCEPT

Nowadays, it is consensual in marketing literature that the brand is more than a name that is given to a product, that involves a vast set of physical, socio-psychological and beliefs' attributes. The brand is therefore a combination of characteristics (what the product is), benefits for the consumer (needs and motivations the product answers to) and values (what the consumer associates to the product). Consensual is also the authors' recommendation, both theoretical and practical, of the importance of developing, communicating and maintaining the brand image as a source of long-term competitive advantage (Baht & Reddy, 1998). In this perspective, the brand management concept suggested by Park et al (1986) is crucial. This model suggests that any brand image must be based on a specific brand concept or in a specific abstract meaning of the brand. Here lies the importance of analysing the brand concept near the consumers. There are many types of brand concepts, but, generally, the brand concept may be symbolic or functional. A functional brand satisfies immediate needs; the symbolic brands satisfy needs connected with status and prestige (Liu, 2002). Another analysis dimension is the so-called brand knowledge. This is connected with the knowledge that an individual has towards a brand of a specific category, the way he compares the brands relatively to their attributes and in the identification of the brand that has those attributes (Baker et al, 2002). Punj & Staelin (1983) state that this dimension of the consumer's knowledge is connected with the amount of the brand relevant information that is stored in his memory. They mention this dimension as the “usable prior knowledge”, considering that the knowledge is directly associated to specific information about brands. In the marketing domain, and mainly due to the influence of the juridical conception of the brand, this has been defined as a “name, term, sign, symbol, drawing or a combination of these, that are used to identify goods or services from a salesman or a group of salesmen, aiming at differentiating from the competition” (Kotler et al, 1999, p. 571). Semprini's approach (1992) concedes a semiotic content to the brand, considering that it gives a universe of meaning to the products, goods or services. In this perspective, the brand is something that is built from signs that express several meanings. In this semiotic conception, the brand is disconnected from the product and expresses itself through its values. In a semiotic

perspective inspired by Peirce¹, Mollerup (1997) a designer that defines the brand from a concept based in three pillars: the signal pillar (name, logo), the object pillar (product, organisations) and the interpreter pillar (the image in the target public of the brand). In this perspective we can go further and define brand as a signal (a name and an identity mix) with a mission inside the organisation, its products and marketing mix and having an image in the different targets, the public mix. Whatever the approach is, the brand is a source of perceived advantages and benefits, not only for the buyers but also for the producers, being able of giving an image of quality, recognition, guarantee, security and exclusiveness; contributing to a certain brand identity, allowing market segmentation, developing and strengthening the exchange relations and legal protection (Baker, 2002; Keller, 1998; Aaker, 2000).

The visual elements perform a crucial role in the brand value establishment, because they improve the recognition and the reading of the brand name and can suggest a set of favourable attributes. Besides that, according to Alessandrini (1983), those who observe can learn much more quickly and effectively from information presented under a pictorial form than under a verbal one. Drawings catch the attention, are easily processed and require less mental resources than the verbal material. The affective dimension of the brand signs is very critical, because it can (or can not) be transferred to the product or to the service. The probability of the affection transfer depends on the nature of the affections (positive or negative), of the intensity of the affection reactions and on the way the signs are associated to the product and to the company. The positive affections may develop along the way with the exposure increasing, but they can also be evoked from the signal design (Henderson & Cote, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

This investigation uses the individual as an analysis unit. This factor has some implications in terms of methodology. According to Buchanan (1994), the problem of conducting researches whose analysis unit is the individual, is that both the investigator and the participant have a conceptualization of the research situation and its results. Human language, thoughts and actions have implications at the level of the investigation methods. This fact is even more relevant, when the analysis unit, more than being individual, is formed by children. Their language skills, their actions and their auto-reflexes are not only qualitatively different from adults, but are also qualitatively different according to their age groups (Buchanan, 1994). Before approaching the specific issue of the methodology, it is important to recognize children's vulnerability and to focus some aspects connected with ethics (Ahuja et al, 2001; Laczniak,

¹ Conception developed by the sociologist Charles Peirce, who includes three components in the signal concept: the signal in itself (the representative), the object the signal refers to (the object) and the interpretations it can originate (the interpreter).

1999; Petty, 1993). Morrow & Richards (1996) mention that in the domain of children investigation, one should never forget that all the investigators are potentially in a power position and that power has always a potential abuse situation associated to it. In ethics, we can speak about three perspectives connected with the marketing investigation in children: the paternalist vision, the limited paternalist vision and the enhanced limited paternalist ethical standard, ELPS (Ahuja, 2001). In the paternalist vision, children are included in the marketing research project, if that research is reverted to the children's interest. The investigator will be compelled not to show the information he obtained in the study, if that information is harmful to children. In this perspective, after beginning the project, the marketing investigator can withdraw the parent's freedom and/or rights in the name of the child. The limited paternalist vision is based in sharing relevant information, analysing the implications and the consequences of the project to the participants, parents and children. However, according to Walters (1989), its adoption in marketing investigation may lead to the "Pontius Pilate Syndrome". This syndrome is associated to the idea that marketing investigators that adopt a paternalist vision, that fulfill all the procedures, even if they personally feel that there may be some harmful elements to children, they "wash their hands" and assume they have respected ethics in their investigation. The ELPS vision implies the adoption of all the demands of the limited paternalist vision, but it goes even further, asking the investigators to present their personal restraints, in case they exist, independently of having acted according to ethical procedures. During the present study there was a permanent concern in following all the procedures defined by the limited paternalist perspective, adding the ELPS vision indication relatively to the personal evaluation of the research impact on children. In this perspective, all the participants in the study were informed about their option of not participating in the study, that they could leave the investigation at any moment and all of them knew exactly their role during the investigation. It was also possible to obtain the authorisation of the schools followed by the parents' consent with the children's participation in the study.

METHOD

According to Hill et al (1996) there are two methods frequently used in the approach to children: focus group and individual interviews. The focus group is one of the adequate methods, because it gives confidence to the children within the context of the group, allowing them to participate actively. In fact, children are less intimidated and have better reactions in group than when they are individually interviewed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). But if they are too many, they also show more concentration problems. When the target public consists of children, the ideal dimension of the focus group is 4/6 children (Hill et al, 1996), which is called, according to some authors, a mini focus group (Krueger, 1998). A mini focus group gathers the participants in a meeting of approximately one hour. This group allows a more

flexible animation, which is very pertinent when we are dealing with children. Mini focus groups also limit the influence of a probable leader and simultaneously improve each member's reaction. As disadvantages, these groups can somewhat reduce the spontaneity of the reactions as well as the information diversity.

SAMPLE

The sample includes children of 6-8 years old. These children belong to the concrete operative stage (7-11 years old) on the Psychology domain (Piaget, 1972) and on the socialization level they belong to the analytical stage (7-11 years old) (John, 1999). It is possible to admit some degree variations in terms of age limits, in order to reduce the number of analysed stages (Roedder & John, 1986; John, 1999). At this age, children have a better market knowledge, a more complex knowledge of advertising concepts and brands and a new perspective that overshadows their own feelings and motivations. They begin to think in the product categories and in the prices, although they do it on a mere functional basis. Brands and products are analysed and discriminated based on more than one attribute or dimension. They are capable of responding to a questionnaire with verbal and non-verbal measures. They are not teenagers yet, but they act as buyers and influencers, thus representing an important market segment. The sample was built with 29 children (62% boys), distributed by three age levels (6, 7 and 8 years old).

PROCEDURES

The groups had 4/5 children and lasted 45 minutes in average. According to Mayes (2000), in terms of practical knowledge it is possible to maintain children's attention for about 20 minutes, in an individual interview. The duration of 45 minutes was adequate because the children were in-group. There were two groups for each age level, which implied the organisation of six focus groups in three consecutive days. Permission was obtained for each one of the children before they participated in the study. The letter of consent of the parents was distributed a week before. This letter asked for the permission for children to participate in a study related to their perceptions relatively to brands and their mascots, giving the option to the parents of receiving a summary of the results. In the schoolyard, children were invited to participate in the session; they were told that there would be some games and figure observation. The interested children were taken from the schoolyard, their teacher grouped them and then they went to a classroom. In case any children should show some discomfort, visual or verbal, he/she would be immediately taken from the room. Only one child left before the ending of the session.

DATA ANALYSIS

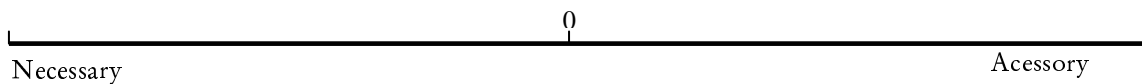
The analysis was based on an audio recording and on the notes taken from the focus groups. This approach implied the reviewing of the audio recording of each group and the transcription of the most relevant and useful parts of the discussion. The transcriptions represent four and a half hours of meetings, and two types of interpretations were made: an ideographic analysis and an across person analysis, both following the procedures of the grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The ideographic analysis was based on a thorough analysis of the transcriptions, followed by the recurrent identification of certain behaviour types and tendencies. The second interpretation level (across person analysis) aimed at finding some behaviour patterns trying to structure and understand the brand and mascot concept among children (Fournier, 1998). Children at these ages don't use specific techniques to issue their opinions. Contrary to adults, who speak about them with some difficulties, sometimes preferring to project themselves into other character or to answer based on analogies, children are more natural. Therefore, the expressions used by children appear exactly as they told them. Some techniques were used to increase the data confidence (Earlondson, 1993). Two colleagues made the transcript revision and the analysis of the interpretative summaries. This procedure implies several data analysis in various occasions, in order to assure the objectivity and comfort of its interpretation. A more formalize analysis of the data was organized accordingly to the *circept frame* (Fustier and Debrinay, 1979), which allowed a graphic representation of the data, as it will be shown later on.

RESULTS: BRANDS TO CHILDREN

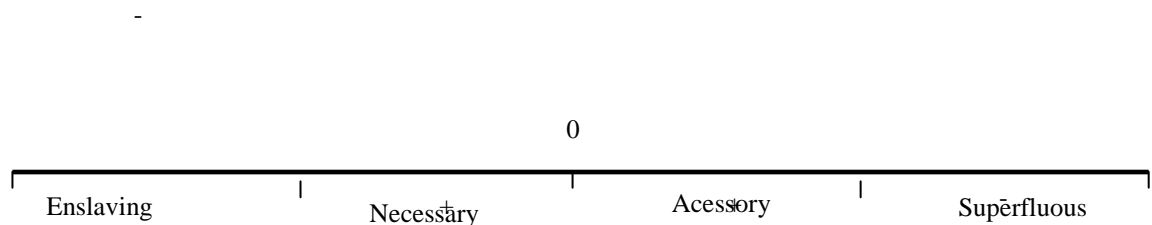
All the qualifiers used by children relatively to the brand were noted. These qualifiers were taken from two main questions of the semi-structured script of the discussion. The first question was based on images connected with cereal packages and the figure of a known mascot, asking the child to observe and comment. In the second question, children were asked what brands are. The data analysis was conducted based on a technique called bipolar conceptual axis research, whose function is the organisation of contradictory evocations associated to the brand concept. It is obvious that a word is nothing more than an imperfect and incomplete description of the reality it represents. Actually, a word is a pure conceptualization (Gordon & Wendy, 2002). Behind any word and any object is the evidence of emotions. Reality can be obtained if we join the conscious and the unconscious, if the concept is characterised from the emotions it carries (Bagozzi, 2000). In this perspective, the *circept frame* becomes relevant, because from a round frame of bipolar conceptual axis it gathers a very rich set of information, established at an emotional level.

There won't be presented any theoretical exhibition of the method, considering that it will be understood with its direct application. On the first stage the adjectives that qualify the same type of attitude were regrouped.

In this study the first great idea given by the majority of the children towards brands is that these are necessary ("everything has to be branded"), but, on the other hand, to other children brands are accessory ("not everything has to be branded, it depends on the things"). We are before the first bipolar axis:



Brands can be necessary or accessory. These are two different perspectives on the same concept, but they don't express a negative connotation towards the brand. What can be negative are the excesses associated to these concepts: an excessively necessary brand may become enslaving, an excessively accessory brand may become superfluous. If we complete the bipolar axes with these extreme positions, which represent in a way the perversions of the positive associations, we obtain the following representation:



From an identical reasoning, we have made a thorough analysis of the data that ended in four bipolar axes, which cover the dominant recollections of children, as we can see on the table in **figure 1**.

The brand understood by It is however crucial to add some notes:

- The first is connected with the fact that the four identified axis represent a compromise between the information volume and the number of axis that could allow a visual perspective of the set, without being excessively complex;
- Not all the axis positions were necessarily evoked by children in the focus group. It is the case of the "presumptuous" brands position, defined as the excess of the "true" brands or the excess of the "accessory" brands defined as "superfluous" brands;

- As a consequence of this, results the fact that the axis construction was not instantaneous; like the authors of this method state, this construction is the result of a discovery method that is done by successive attempts, based on a constant “come and go” between the whole and the detail of the obtained data. In this stage, we have the necessary foundations to present the graphic representation of the several axes. **Figure 2** represents the circling structure that regulates the axes according to their neighborhood or conceptual analogy². The circling reading of the figure allows a series of successive analogies that softly leads to the opposite of the initial concept. As we can see in the following figure, brands are necessary, truthful and, therefore, expensive, they can be fun and consequently accessory, discrete and they can represent a good exchange (value for money) and therefore they are serious and necessary (Figure 3). The first advantage of this systemization is evident: it allows us to organize and visualize the conceptual complexity of a concept like the brand based on a single figure. It also allows the understanding, or at least the connection of the contradictory images that result from a thorough analysis, interacting the conscious and the unconscious world of the consumers. After representing the *circept* of the brand, it is crucial to define the profile of the brand among children, conceived from the frequency of each concept associated to the several dialectic axes³. The bounded area by the bold blue line that appears in the *circept* periphery, corresponds to the frequency of positive recollections; the inside area, represented by the red hatched line, represents the set of negative recollections (**Figure 3**).

To Keller (1998), the brand performs several functions in the consumers (differentiation, guarantee, authenticity, identification, personalization, hedonic function and ethical function). According to the present study, the key functions of the brand to children are: identification, guarantee and authenticity. According to them, brands are necessary, truthful and expensive. In this study, children face brands as something necessary, inherent to the market and crucial to identify the offer: “everything has to be branded”, “we cannot find things unbranded”. The perception of brands as something truthful can be confirmed from the relation that children establish with the “true love” brands (Ji, 2002): “I know that everything from Nike is good, for example, I already had snickers from other brands and Nike’s are the best, there’s no comparison”. Brands are expensive; this association shows the dimension of the symbolic knowledge of the brands (John, 1999), reflecting brands as something one can aspire to. According to Ji (2002) this association expresses the metaphoric relation that children establish with brands, called the “secret admirer”: children admire brands, they are good and expensive (“in the future I want a jeep like my father’s, but as it is a very expensive brand it must be when I’m really old”. Less frequent but also revealing, is the fact that to some children, brands

² Changing the original version in order to enhance the positive concepts after the first reading, they were placed on the exterior of the axes and the negative concepts, shaded, were placed inside the axes.

³ In the *circept*, the (0) represents the indifference point, (+) the total acceptance of the association and (-) the total acceptance of the negative associations.

represent a fair exchange:” value for money” (“there are good brands that are not expensive, like Zara”). This association reflects a brand relation of the “good friends” type (Ji, 2002), a brand that can be trusted. In the shadows, within the context of the less favourable associations, some children see brands as being exploiters, phony, cheating, they don’t keep to their promises (“sometimes things have brands and are bad”). This association reflects the vision of the “brands as enemies” (Ji, 2002), brands that defraud the expectations.

CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

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 with some caution. Several authors 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 in 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. 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.

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 *circept*. The bipolar axes represented in figures 3 and 6 may be transformed into attitude scales, allowing the quantification of the brand concept among children.

Figure 1
The brand understood by children: dialectic axes

-	+	+	-
<p>Enslaving (1)⁴</p> <p>- If it is unbranded it doesn't exist, tell me something without a brand name? (1)</p>	<p>Necessary (19)</p> <p>- Brands are important for us to know what things are (8)</p> <p>- Everything must be branded (4)</p> <p>- It is important that things are branded (5)</p> <p>- I wouldn't like something unbranded, not without a brand (2)</p>	<p>Accessory (4)</p> <p>- Not everything has to be branded, it depends on things (3)</p> <p>- I don't even know if some products are branded, like toilet paper (1)</p>	<p>Superfluous (0)</p>
<p>Childish (1)</p> <p>- Some brands are only for babies, they have childish cartoons (1)</p>	<p>Funny (7)</p> <p>- I think branded things are funnier, they're more amusing (2)</p> <p>- Brands animate things, they have colours, symbols, cartoons (3)</p> <p>- I think that brand ads are funny (2)</p>	<p>Serious (0)</p>	<p>Grave (0)</p>
<p>Exploiting (8)</p> <p>- There are some very, very expensive brands (4)</p> <p>- We can buy very expensive brands and in the end they're not good (2)</p> <p>- Some things are branded only to be more expensive (2)</p>	<p>Expensive (20)</p> <p>- Good things are branded and expensive (3)</p> <p>- The best selling brands are the most expensive (2)</p> <p>- Good brands are expensive (4)</p> <p>- Nike stuff is expensive, like sneakers or football clothing (5)</p> <p>- Nokia mobile phones</p>	<p>Value for Money (2)</p> <p>- Not all the expensive brands are good, Zara is not expensive but it's good (2)</p>	<p>Cheap (1)</p> <p>- It's like F.C.Porto's clothing, in fairs the t-shirts are fake, that's why they're cheap (1)</p>

⁴ The numbers indicated in brackets correspond to the number of quotations made to describe that characteristic. Therefore, there were 85 pertinent occurrences, leading to the creation of twelve categories in terms of content analysis representing the bipolar axes of the *circépt*.

	are good because they are branded (6)		
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)

Figure 2
Brand's Circept

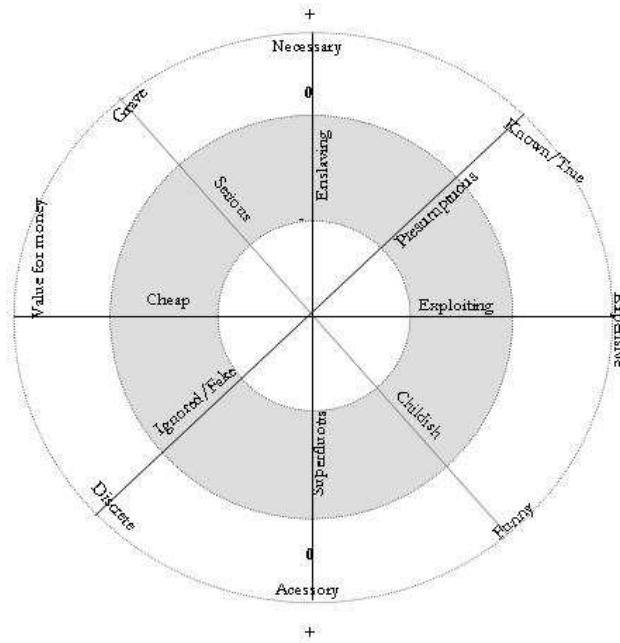
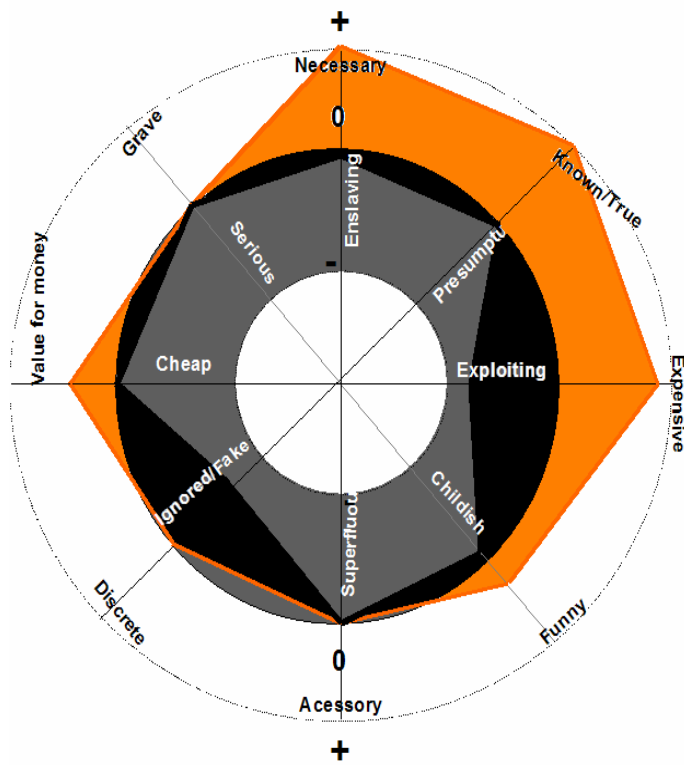


Figure 3
Brand's Profile



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