

## European children talk about animated cartoons

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### INTRODUCTION

The research described in this paper consisted of a qualitative survey conducted in four European countries (Italy, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France) in March 1997 on a total sample of 100 children aged 6 to 12 years, all of whom watch television every day (from a minimum of one hour to a maximum of three hours a day). The Kidspeak methodology was used to obtain the data. This methodology calls for:

- *interviews in pairs* in the case of younger children (6-9 years), for whom it is important to provide a narrow, limited environment in which they can express themselves more confidently;
- *mini-groups* (four respondents per group) in the case of older children (10-12 years), who are better able to cope with a collective situation that facilitates interpersonal dynamics without 'repressing' individual contributions.

In both cases, the characteristics of *homogeneity* (of sex and age) and *familiarity* (pairs of friends) between the children were guaranteed in order to promote active, uninhibited participation in the interview. For this purpose, a comfortable, reassuring, entertaining environment was provided in which the children could move around freely.

The interview techniques used were 'research activity with children': games, role-playing, drawing, collages and story-telling. These techniques promote emotional expression by means of a non-verbal, projective type of communication.

### RESULTS

The entire sample of the research project 'European Children Talk About Animated Cartoons' mainly attend 'full-time' school (on average from 8.30 am to 3.30 pm). Their leisure activities are quite varied, depending on both the age and the sex of the respondent (see [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#)).

Irrespective of these variables, television viewing occupies a central role in the leisure activities of European children, and this role seems to 'evolve' from mere babysitting to an informational and entertainment function. This multiple role does not include a family aggregation function; children mainly watch TV alone, and only share a small number of programmes with grown-ups (variety programmes with games/quiz shows).

The 'quantity' of children's TV varies in the four countries; there are four thematic channels devoted to children in the United Kingdom, two in France and the Netherlands, and three shortly to be launched in Italy. Nevertheless, basic developmental needs clearly emerged as similar and constant in all four countries.

Children tend to class TV programmes according to the age criterion as children's programmes (cartoons, films and films made for TV) and adult programmes (the news and talk shows).

The children interviewed proved to know the cartoons shown and to perceive them in a differentiated way according to 'subjective' segmentation criteria (substantial/insubstantial characters; strong/weak narrative structure) and 'objective' criteria (age and sex of sample). The 'production source' of cartoons and the 'on-air' presence of the programme proved to be necessary but not sufficient to bring about a stable emotional bond between cartoon and child.

The children's preferences regarding television programmes seemed to reflect and express the developmental needs of the various age groups:

- 6-9 year old children's need for *reassurance*, *containment*, *omnipotence* and predominance of 'concrete thinking' (each external fact is processed as though it was true) which led to a preference for *fantasy*, in particular for simpler emotions and adventures;
- 10-12 year old children's need for *identification*, *separation*, *control* and predominance of 'abstract thinking' (the external data are processed in a more complex and personal way) which led to a preference for *fiction*, in particular for more complex emotions and adventures.

As a result, age-based segmentation was observed in relation to the perception and liking of cartoon characters:

- preference for fantasy characters (animals) among children aged 6-9 years;
- preference for anthropomorphic characters among children aged 10-12 years.

Sex also influences children's choices, especially in terms of identification. Girls seem to prefer characters that express love, gentleness, kindness and humour, while boys prefer those which convey adventure, risk, competition and combat.

The differing 'quantity' of children's TV broadcast in the four countries influences the spontaneous segmentation into 'families' effected by children. The sample of children from France, Italy and the Netherlands performed this operation with ease, using similar criteria, whereas the sample from the United Kingdom found it more difficult in view of that country's more complex and variegated market.

In any event, the cartoons broadcast in all four countries tend to be similarly perceived by children, whereas in some cases 'local' cartoons tend to form separate groups.

On the whole, five major 'families' emerged: Disney cartoons, super-heroes, baby cartoons, Japanese cartoons (Italy and France) and mischief (United Kingdom). The level of liking, and above all the type of emotional bond established by children with each of the five families, differs. The families are listed below in order of importance:

- The Disney family seems to be the best-loved by the sample, as it includes the most substantial characters and stories. This family is divided into three sub-groups:
  1. romantic characters, eg Aladdin, Pocahontas and Simba, which emerge as positive characters in all four countries, and are mainly preferred by older children as they express more 'adult', complex internal contradictions/conflicts
  2. animal characters, eg Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge, which again in all four countries are positively evaluated as characters devoid of contradictions and therefore especially liked by younger children
  3. wacky or Warner Bros characters, eg Bugs Bunny, Road Runner and Wile E Coyote, which are particularly liked in the United Kingdom and Italy, where they stand out for their popularity and massive on-air presence. These cartoons are characterised by conflicts between the characters, and are differently interpreted according to the child's age.
- The super-hero family, eg Batman, Superman, Streetsharks and Ace Ventura, mainly appeals to the boys in the sample, for whom these characters act as an identification model, especially in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.
- The baby cartoon family, eg Spotty, Babar and Pingu, is mainly liked by smaller children because these characters convey attributes of playfulness and fantasy while also appealing to the sample of older children because they arouse feelings of 'maternal' identification.
- The Japanese cartoon family, eg Sailor Moon, Biker Mice, and Holly and Benjy, is present in a clear and differentiated way in Italy and France; however, it segments the sample by sex and age according to the characteristics perceived for each character.
- The mischief family, eg Rugrats, the Smurfs and the Simpsons, is only present in the sample of British children. It comprises a group of complex characters able to meet children's different emotional needs and institute deep bonds through the channel of entertainment and humour. This attribute makes them partly comparable with the characters in the Disney family.

As regards the links between characters and products and/or brands, the research conducted in the four countries indicates that the spontaneous associations made by children are conveyed by the functional and real characteristics of the characters, especially in the lower age group (6-9 years).

The association between character and brand appears more indirect; it is particularly facilitated by external stimuli such as merchandising products, fashionable brands and advertising, especially in the case of the higher age group (10-12 years).

This bond, once established, tends to remain strongly present in the various age groups considered, especially in terms of recall.

When a reel containing clips from cartoons and commercials was shown, it emerged that:

- children watch commercials with an emotional attention and intensity similar to that observed while they are watching cartoons,
- commercials in which brands become cartoons are immediately recognised, although the intensity of recall differs, depending on whether the brand is 'incarnated' by the cartoon or associated with a specially invented character.

The importance attributed to the presence of cartoon characters in commercials varies according to age; at 6-9 years it represents a necessary and sufficient condition for liking and recall of the commercial, whereas at 10-12 years it is still a sufficient but no longer a necessary condition for liking and recall.

## SUMMARY

The sample know most cartoon characters, and perceive them in a differentiated way.

The children spontaneously identified 'families' of characters, with which they establish emotional bonds that differ in intensity and duration on the basis of:

- subjective factors;
  1. substantial/insubstantial characters,
  2. strong/weak narrative structure,
- objective factors;

1. the child's age, especially the stage of development reached, and the predominance of *concrete vs abstract thought*,
2. the child's sex, and the opportunity to identify with 'typically' male/female themes/feelings.

In particular, the families identified by the children were:

- *Disney cartoons* (distinguished from Disney films by the British children) create strong, stable bonds because the strong, stable characterisation of the characters and the universal appeal of the stories allow identification with and imaginative development on typically human themes and feelings. This family of characters, more than any of the others, 'covers' the needs of the various age groups, both providing entertainment and promoting children's psychological growth.
- *Super-hero characters* create bonds which are fairly intense (among British children) but transient in relation to age and segmented in terms of sex (mainly liked by boys).
- *Baby cartoons* are mainly liked by smaller children because they convey attributes of playfulness and fantasy, but also appeal to older children because they create 'maternal' identification. These characters are not perceived by children on the basis of their European production origin, a factor that is not particularly differentiating in the child's mind. As the perception of this family proved fragmented and segmented, the characters do not institute strong bonds with children.
- *Japanese cartoons* (present in Italy and France) create intense but fleeting bonds as they are influenced by 'fashions', and therefore easily 'forgotten' by children when they cease to be broadcasted. These characters are not strongly characterised, and the stories are too crowded with themes and 'cardboard' characters which do not operate in depth.
- *The Mischiefs* (present in the United Kingdom) create intense bonds with children through the portrayal of human and identificatory themes/feelings emotionally comparable to those of the Disney characters.

There is a strong degree of spontaneous association between cartoon characters and product categories. This association appears to be conveyed by the functional and real characteristics of the characters. It can therefore be assumed that product brands consistent with the properties attributed to a character have an equal opportunity of exploiting the bond with that character:

- by using it as endorser in commercials for the brand,
- by working towards making it the brand's 'icon'.

However, in view of the findings that emerged about the different types of emotional relationships established by children with cartoon characters, the choice of character must be considered with care so that in general, the brand is not associated with characters that have a very short life cycle (as in the case of 'Japanese' cartoon characters).

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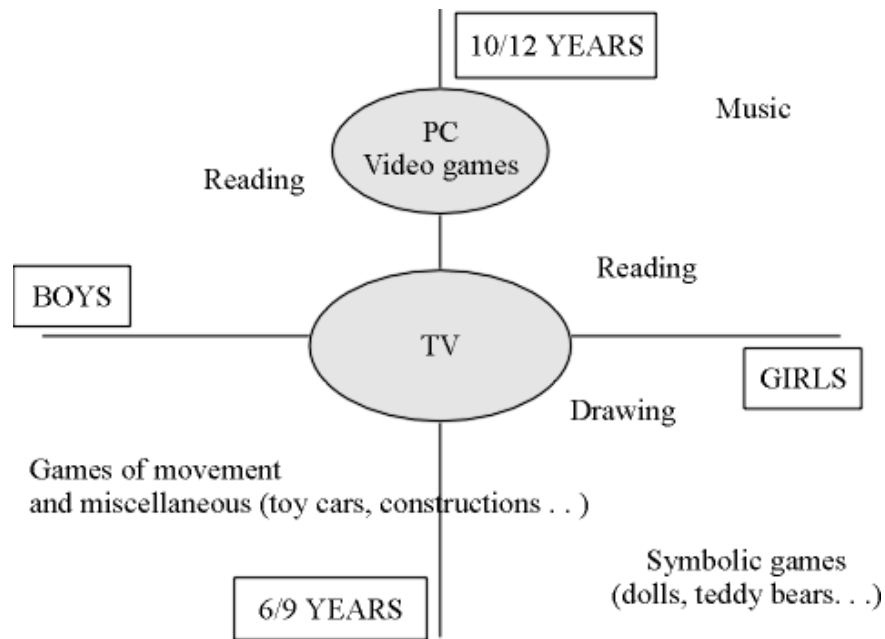
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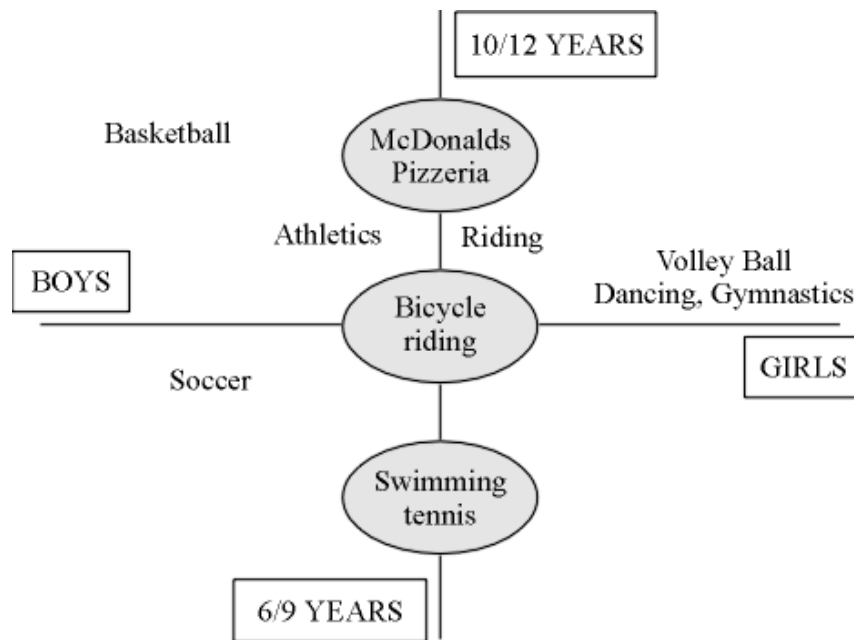
## NOTES & EXHIBITS

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### FIGURE 1: LEISURE TIME ACTIVITIES



**FIGURE 2: LEISURE TIME ACTIVITIES**



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