

How media literate are we? The voices of 9 years old children about brands, ads and their online community practices

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Abstract

The ubiquity of media in our society and the use of the Internet and in particular the World Wide Web as a convergent medium for a huge diversity of content and formats (movies in cinema and in YouTube, radio and cartoons on the Web and TV, social networks) has been a concern of academics, educators and governments. In what concerns to children audiences, the focus has been on safety and security of children and the correspondent online data protection.

Questions of the impact of subliminal forms of marketing communication target to children start to emerge in a world where marketing strategies and entertainment are more and more connected.

The main goal of this study is to explore what children aged from 8-10 years old think of brands, ads and their purpose. Can they understand the difference between a brand and an advertisement? Do they like/dislike ads? From which place/media/person they recognize brands and ads (even if they don't use or know the product)?

We are interested in questions such as: if children socialize more and more with media, what are the risks and the opportunities? Do they need a media literacy program or do they learn by themselves to distinguish informational and persuasive media?

To answer these questions we have been working with an elementary school community (class) since March 2009. We have been using an ethnographic approach and our conceptual framework is based on the Activity Theory. The activities developed with children (community) are about old and new media learning, supported by the usage of a private Web Site (tool) (<http://amigos.realcolegio.pt>) and moderated by the researcher.

The question of the engagement with new media and how to design and use such IT platforms at school is also discussed. The relationship of these children with media as "users", as "spectators" and as "creators" has been observed and the results will be presented¹.

Keywords: children studies, media literacy, participative web design, marketing to children, online communities, activity theory.

Introduction

Tweens, Media and Consumer Culture

The "discovery" of children as an important market segment is not a new thing but the last two decades showed an unprecedented growing of commercial brand strategies at an earlier childhood stage.

Until recently the target of commercial corporations has been the *teenagers* but nowadays the so called "*tweens*"² segment has been acquiring the status of a powerful market. There is a generalized agreement

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² The word "tween" was used in first place in 1987, in an article of the "Marketing and Media Decisions" journal.

among researchers that the concept *tween* associates pre-teens (8-12 years old) to consumption. But why children become more and more important to corporations? First of all there is a trend in western developed societies toward children pocket money (they are consumers and buyers) and secondly market research studies show that children can influence their family buying process (Tuftte 2007: 94).

Then, this is the result of two convergent issues in contemporary society: the continuous search for markets (an economical and political issue) and the evolution of the “child” concept in the last thirty years (the changing social construct of children) from a vulnerable being to a competent actor of his/her own life (Tuftte 2007: 94).

It is a sign of the times, times of media abundance, that following the screening of a moving picture from Disney, one can buy the characters and books as well to visit the corresponding Web site, to play a game and to access edutainment content. For the media industry the child is “the sovereign consumer” (Buckingham, 2007: 81).

The consumption of media and the merchandising are deeply connected (Figure 1) what makes very efficient the brands’ communication investments (and this is called cross-selling). These marketing strategies make possible an “all around brand” in everyday consumer life.

This kind of economical and political environment arise questions about how this commodity culture impacts the children identity development and their sense of community (Livingstone & Drotner, 2008: 1).

The usage of consumer products as “communicators” (Featherstone, 1991: 84), cultural symbols and not only as utilities determines how children represent their peers and themselves.

Consumers (and children) negotiate relationships, identities and life styles throughout their consumption practices. Consumption means inclusion or exclusion in society (Tuftte, B. & Ekstrom, 2007: 12).

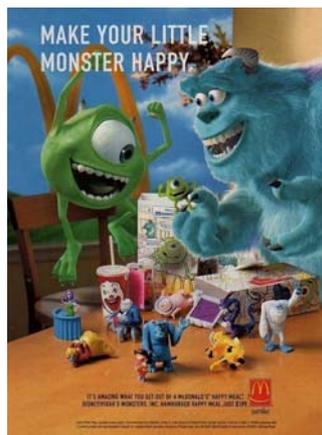


Figure 1 Cooperative Advertising from Monsters, INC. and McDonalds³

³ Available at [http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1137/1411737802_5004e3b8b4_o.jpg]; accessed last time in 2008/06/10.

The Children entertainment culture has its own aesthetics: it is fun, frenetic, fantastic and colorful. The visual communication prevails over other texts and that is having that in account that commercial messages aimed to children are created (Kenway, J. & Bullen E., 2007: 169). To capture the attention and “seduce” children the commercial messages makes more and more usage of entertainment, what is an advantage when compared to the messages that Institutions like family and school (among others) send to children.

Most of the research about media and children has been centered on audiovisual content and its “effects”, but the new integrated marketing communications approach also uses the Internet and the mobile phones (new media). At the center of the new media and children research the main concern is about security on contact. Less attention has been devoted to the multiple forms of online advertising and selling and particularly unethical ones aimed to children (Figure 8). How do children cope with these branded environments? What are the risks and the opportunities? Do they need a media literacy program or do they learn by themselves to distinguish informational and persuasive media?

Children usually do not recognize the persuasive intent underlying advertising until around age 7 or 8. To process advertisements effectively, the viewer must recognize that the source of the advertisement has perspectives and interests other than those of the audience (Scantlin, 2006).

Strategies of Media-Children Regulation

The Childhood condition is of international interest, as illustrated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 20th of November of 1989.

The recognition of the “universal” rights of children, not taking in account local cultures, is an unequivocal way of saying that children belong to society which should protect them and act upon their best interest.

An historical perspective on children perception shows that they have been perceived by adults as “different”, the “other one”, more vulnerable and dependent as well more influenced by media and technology. In the past several representatives of the nation-state were in charge of the decision of media role upon children (Oswell, 2007: 475).

Besides all the “new” media effects on children have been of public concern all over the times, it is after the Second World War that the violence on media dominates the public debate and faces regulation.

In the 40's and 50's, the USA and UK already had in place a tie-in between TV programming and the merchandise of toys, what Oswell (2007: 477) calls the engine of commodity culture.

In the 90's the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) imposed a limit on advertising per hour on the USA and decided a minimum of 3 hours of educational content aimed to children under 16 years old, as a pre-requisite of TV licensing.

With the commercial interest on the Internet in the end of 90's, the regulation debate was centered on the Web, but didn't forget the context of media abundance.

In Europe, the Bangemann Report (1994) has defined the Information Society as an important step toward the development of a European Information Economy. The competitive advantage of such economy is based on the integration of historically separated industries: computers, telecommunications and content distribution. The Internet (socially and technically) symbolizes such convergence and adds an increasing complexity to the content and content regulation.

The European directives are grounded on the principle that technology is neutral, what could be a problem. In what concerns illegal content, the policy of European Commission recommends auto-regulation and an increased parental control. This Parental-control policy seems to be a paradox: children belong to society but the Parents must control the children-media relation, facing all the media industry giants.

Aligned with the auto-regulation strategy there are European academics and institutions that promote the education on media and consumer literacy.

Media, Brand and Critical Literacy

More and more Educators have begun to recognize that, despite their students' familiarity with the internet and other technology, young people may or may not have skills necessary to access, analyze, and evaluate the information or entertainment available online (Hobbs, Renee 2008: 431).

The rise of the Internet created the need to redefine the concept of literacy to incorporate technology, media and popular culture. And the growing influence of branded media in popular culture brings to the discussion the concept of brand literacy (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006):

Brand literacy is the ability of the consumer to decode the strategies used in marketing practices in introducing, maintaining and reformulating brands and brand images, which then, further enables the consumer to engage with these processes within their cultural settings.

This concept of brand literacy is about the cognitive abilities necessary to process advertising: to respond to advertising in an adult like manner children must be able to distinguish noncommercial content from ads, as well to recognize that the informative or persuasive intent of advertising is not an isolated temporal action from a company to sell products but a process that is aligned with their everyday life and lifestyles.

There are a few conceptualizations of literacy or "new literacies" which have been proposed and discussed in the USA, the UK and more recently all over Europe. According to Hobbs (2008) the first debates among stakeholders in media literacy appeared in 1998 and were about whether media literacy should be conducted in school or after-school programs and whether or not the media companies should contribute to the media literacy movement.

The program Media Smart that was created in Canada in 1998 was introduced in Portugal by APAN (the Association of Portuguese Advertisers) in the beginning of 2008. The main objective is to “create in every child the necessary skills to a critical vision of advertising”, as is stated in their Web Site. During the first year the program reached more than 30% of public elementary schools. Beside that information there is no evaluation or information about evaluation of the program on the Web Site. The program is aligned with the Media Smart program in UK.

For David Buckingham (2007) the media education of children involves: analysis and production; it's not defensive, it's not training but critical literacy.

Livingstone & Drotner interrogate (2008: 2): «should they be literate in multimedia, in computers or in information? Maybe the most critical skill for the development of children in such a complex and changing environment is critical analysis».

Besides all the claims from the Academic community in Europe and other regions about the need for media Education as critical literacy, it is not clear or evident that critical literacy is acquired by children from those media programs.

The question of what is critical literacy should be clarified in the context of this text: critical literacy begins with the recognition that texts display messages, viewpoints, and perspectives that can be interrogated by individuals and social groups. Because people create texts according to their values and beliefs about the world, texts imply values (Mosley & Eli, 2007).

On the present study we focus on children brand literacy: what they have learned from media, family, school and peers about the strategies that corporations develop to establish beneficial (for their commercial activities) relationships with them.

The Concept of Community

The understanding of what nowadays constitutes a community has been a subject of discussion addressed by several authors (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Shah, McLeod & Yoon, 2001; Wenger, White, Smith & Rowe, 2005). McMillan and Chavis (1986) distinguished between the territorial/ geographical notion from the relational and common interest based notion of community, the former with no reference to a physical space but rather concerned with human relationships. Thus, community can refer to a group of people that share a geographical space or a group of people that share interests and interact together. Although several definitions has been completed, it is widely and general accepted that a community is a group of persons that interact together and share common symbols, conventions and references to external facts acquired through social contact within the community - sharing experiences, feelings, interests and goals amongst all elements (Joyce, 2004; Kollock & Smith, 2002). Accordingly, Wellman (2005) define a

community as a network of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity.

The definition of this form of social organization has been gradually developed, emphasizing the factors that contribute to a growing sense of community as an essential feature to the community concept, capable of distinguish real communities from groups of people that interact together. This concept – Sense of Community (SOC) - emerged in the 80's and is defined as an individual sense of being part of a group and sharing with others specific needs. McMillan and Chavis (1986) were the first authors approaching this concept developing a measure (Chavis Sense of Community Measure-1986) based in four dimensions - membership (feeling of belonging that develops emotional safety and personal investment in the group), influence (a bidirectional action: the individual influences the group and the group influences the individual, group pressure to conformity, social cohesiveness), fulfillment of needs (positive reinforcement) and shared emotional connection (quality of interaction, shared events, values and emotions, social support), stating that:

Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shared faith that member's needs will be meet through their commitment to be together" (Mc Millan, 1976 cit. by Mc Millan & Chavis, 1986, p. 4).

Mediacult-PT Research Design

In the project "MEDIACULT-PT", the main goal is to study how the use of new media, and particularly social networks, can foster more social participation among community members. Media studies history depicts this move from a media centric approach focused in understanding how media affect people to a perspective more interested in understanding what people do with media – the Subject-media perspective.

In this context, the use of activity theory seems very valuable, both at a micro and macro level. At a micro level of analysis, one can use activity theory to inform design using a framework that puts interactivity as a product of a "subject intention toward an object" (his/her true motives) and mediated by a tool (media, information systems and technologies). At a macro level, one can view activities as representations of the roles the users perform while using a certain medium.

The relation subject-community is regulated by rules (Kuuti, K., 1996), and one can say that each community has to be managed. The community itself could be face-to-face or virtual and the usage of a tool by community members depends on the effort, time and engagement. We believe that the particular tool to be chosen by an individual or a group depends at first on the cultural, technological and political contexts. Without a particular mix of those conditions there is no access and no usage. Likewise, our research focus is on the level of participation of individuals on virtual spaces and its relationship with real

contributes to the management of communities. In our approach the interaction design process is initiated by the study of activities conducted by people acting in everyday life; people that share spaces and emotions with other people, at school or work, in diverse contexts and media experiences. The expected outcome is some level of productivity and satisfaction, or through the lens of activity theory: transformation (both of tool and human). This goal is pursued via the introduction of a set of methodologies and tools as described in Figure 2.

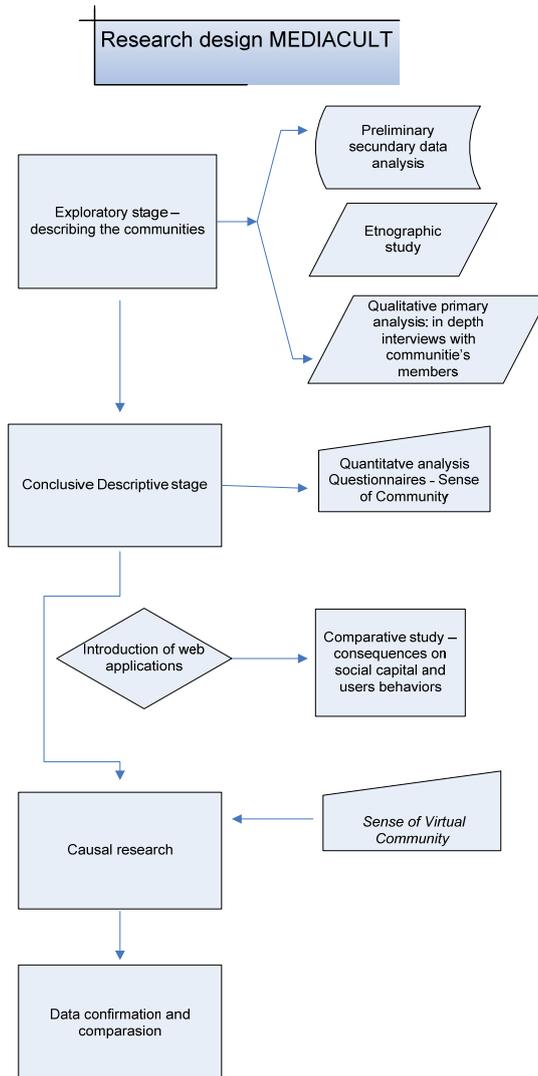


Figure 2 – MEDIACULT-PT research design

The proposed research design assumes a mixed approach based both on qualitative and quantitative techniques. An exploratory approach using ethnographic techniques is used in the beginning of the research not only in order to describe and understand the communities, but more importantly, to identify the tools that the users are manipulating as a mean to fulfill their intentions. This stage covers the analytical micro level understanding of the activity.

Later, we start a conclusive descriptive stage where, based on the qualitative information gathered on the first stage. Through the application of quantitative questionnaires, we did the identification of the dimensions that confirm a particular group as one "community"; specifically we measured their sense of community.

On the third stage, we introduce a causal research method based on the development and use by the community of specific tools that can help users in realizing activities they intend to and consider to be relevant to the reinforcement of the sense of belonging to the community.

In the final stage we evaluate how the activities being conducted by the individuals are reshaping the sense of community and in what degree it is related with the use of the media tools introduced in the previous stage.

The results to be presented in the next sections are from the community children only and focus on activities with children since the introduction of the Web Site – "Friends of Real Colégio" in October 2009. The qualitative approach includes participant observation, interviews with children and content analysis of the activities on the Web site.

The Children Community

The children community is a face-to-face school community which members have a great knowledge about the new technologies. This community consists of a private school community in general: the teachers, the administration and other professionals involved in the school everyday tasks and in particular three classes of the 1st cycle, one of the 4th grade and two of the 3rd grade, including a total of 25 students between 8 and 9 years old (mean age = 8.5), 16 male students and 9 students from female gender.

In the educational project of the academic year 2008/ 2009 the college presented as pedagogic assumptions a balance between the new teaching methods and the old values, including educational tools related to new technologies such as interactive multimedia lessons, and also teaching strategies more related with an exposure and sharing of knowledge in a traditional form. Apart from all the curriculum component, the students have many extracurricular activities in which they may participate, some more related with areas of knowledge (English, computer science, artistic expression) and others with the development of psychomotricity (judo, gymnastics and ballet).The students belong to a socio-economic

class above average in Portugal, having computer and access to the internet in school and at home, even that there are some restrictions on its use, and they use mostly the e-mail and the *Escola Virtual* (a program developed by *Porto Editora* and used at school) to communicate outside school. A vast majority of students (22 students) of the 3rd and 4th year attended this college since pre-school, maintaining contact for several years. Through interviews and questionnaires conducted with the children in the classroom context we may enumerate some of the computer applications the children already use: the Paint, Word and Power Point; and as web sites knew the Google, MSN, *Escola Virtual*, YouTube, iTunes and Web sites for games - Crayon, *Brincar.pt*, *Jogos10*, *Sou criança*, *Mil jogos*, *MiniClip*, *Polly*, *O Sítio dos Miudos*.

The community behavioral patterns and its maintenance process are based mainly in the teaching-learning process and the relationships created and maintained community at school time. The community works with self-regulatory functions and processes, however there is a hierarchy of functions based on the status of each element to the overall functionality of the community.

Results for the Children Community

Sense of Community

In order to examine the communities under study in relation to the sense of community among its members we used the Chavis Sense of Community (SOC – 1986).

The Chavis measure reports to face-to-face communities and allows the quantification of sense of community in a scale from 0 to 12 values, including four sub-dimensions: sense of togetherness, influence, satisfaction of needs and shared emotional connections. The measure includes twelve statements to which the individuals should answer with “true” or “false”, depending on their personal interpretation of the factors addressed in the questions. Twelve statements with “true” as an answer correspond to the maximum of the sense of community measure.

The results of Chavis Sense of Community scale pointed out a strong sense of belonging among elements of the college community, resulting in 71% of sense of community.

Reporting the measure sub dimensions, the results confirm as the most powerful dimensions the membership and shared emotional connections. Besides the influence dimension shows relatively close values of affirmative and negative responses.

The Web Site “Friends of Real Colégio”

In March 2009, after measuring the sense of Community, the research goal was to understand the desired “activities” of children in a Web Site for them (what could motivate children in using a web site developed

for them in the context of media social education?). The outcome consisted of written user requisites for children online community (on the web) and the information architecture that is in practice a tree diagram with content and site functionality.

During a participatory Web design session with 15 children of the community, organized by the researchers, homepage proposals were created (Figure 3). This is important to notice that this activity shows that children designed the homepage according their previous knowledge on web design that was acquired only using the Web.

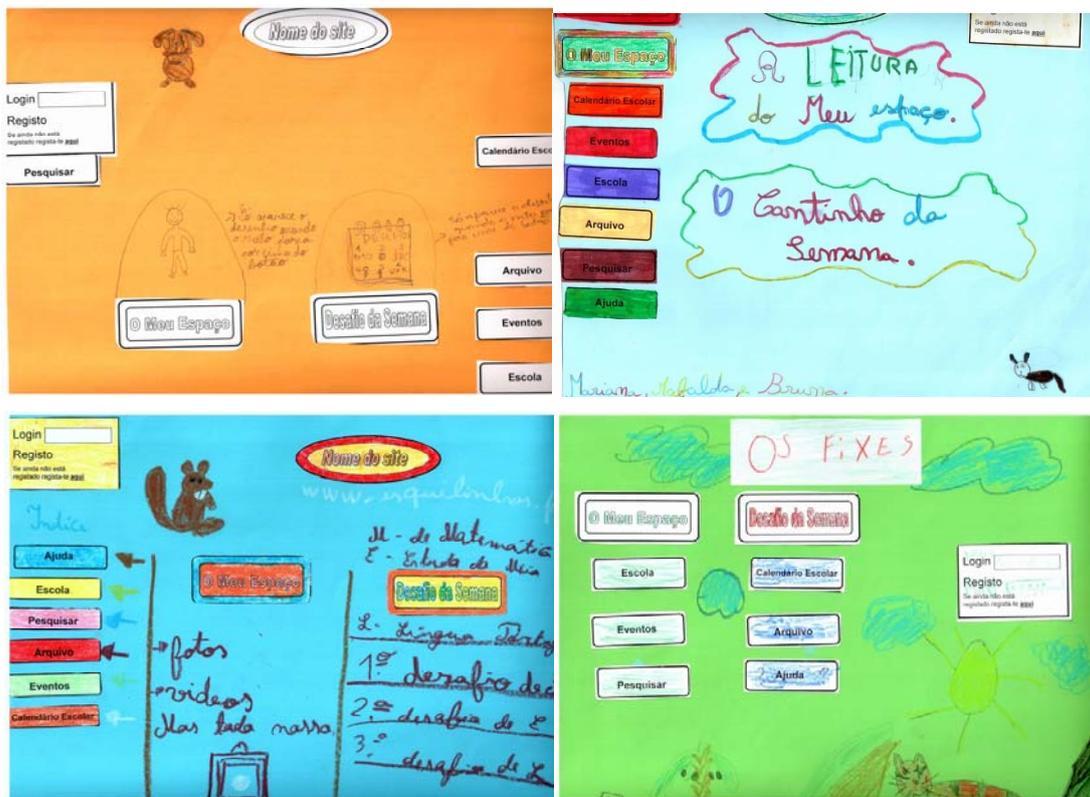


Figure 3 - Web design proposals from Participatory sessions with Children

One can say that they expect the name of the site to be located on the top left or top center; the login area on the top left and their personalized area is expected to be located on the center of the page (on a visible area), what is consistent with adults expectations for location of this kind of objects in a e-commerce Web site (Costa, C. 2006). Such expectations are the result of their familiarity with Web Sites and it is a measure of their web design literacy.

The Web site, was launched in October 2010 and introduced as a private social network for children of the 4th degree (9-10 years old), the same that cooperate on the Web design (see Figure 4).

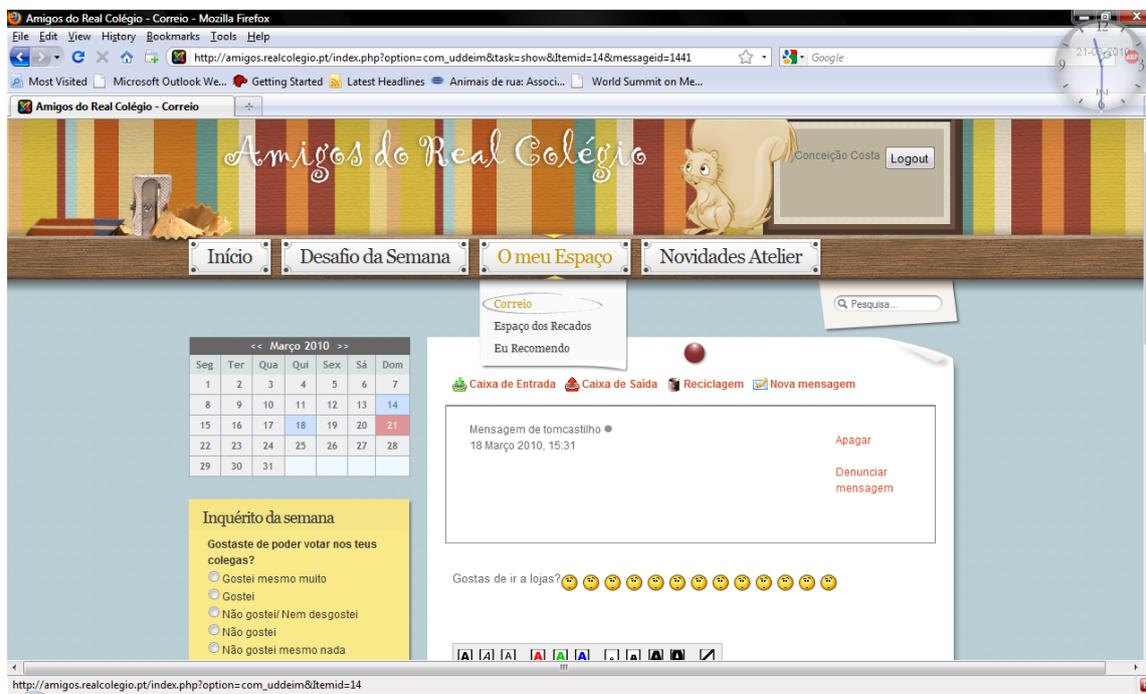


Figure 4 – Page result for “my space”>email.

The Program “Social Education for Media”

On the second stage, we did participant observation on the “Social Education for Media” program that occurs every week. The usage by the children’s community of the Web Site “Amigos Real Colégio”⁴ (Real Colégio’ Friends) has not been the “focus” of the research but the activities conducted by the researcher with the children community. Otherwise, the Web site was an important tool for intra-community communication and educational activities.

The research sessions with the children take place at school and have the duration of one hour a week during two semesters. A total of 28 children (two groups) attend the classes. The content program created by the researcher was approved by the School’s Pedagogical Coordinator. The study objectives that are under analysis on this paper are as follows:

⁴ “Amigos Real Colégio” is a private access web site available on the Internet at (<http://amigos.realcolégio.pt>)

To access the brand literacy of the children;

To develop children analytical skills on different types of media formats;

To develop children skills toward responsible practices of consumption

To identify the social and cultural consequences of the use of participatory media within a community and the changes it brings about.

Summative evaluation: what they already knew

For those unfamiliar with marketing terminology a brand is: a name and/or a symbol that represents a Seller's product or service and differentiates it from competition. But this is a simplified vision of what a brand is on our society. The search for a brand identity (that is some kind of "soul" or life style for consumers), put the market researchers and communication agencies in charge of studying the meaning of brands on the cultural life of people. Such fact has a crucial impact on the product and brand management: companies used to develop products and assign a brand to them, but nowadays the most successful companies develop brands for a multiplicity of products that fit on consumers identities.

Advertising is one of possible tactics used by companies to inform and persuade people about a particular brand. What distinguishes advertisements of other marketing communications activities is that is a paid activity that could be seen in a lot of places and media.

The first session related to brand literacy, consisted of a summative evaluation on brands and advertising.

The instrument was a script with images from Web sites and a survey with close and open questions. Children were asked to check (X) all the images they recognize (Figure 5). In a second moment the researcher asked children to choose all the images that are brands and at last the images that are advertising.

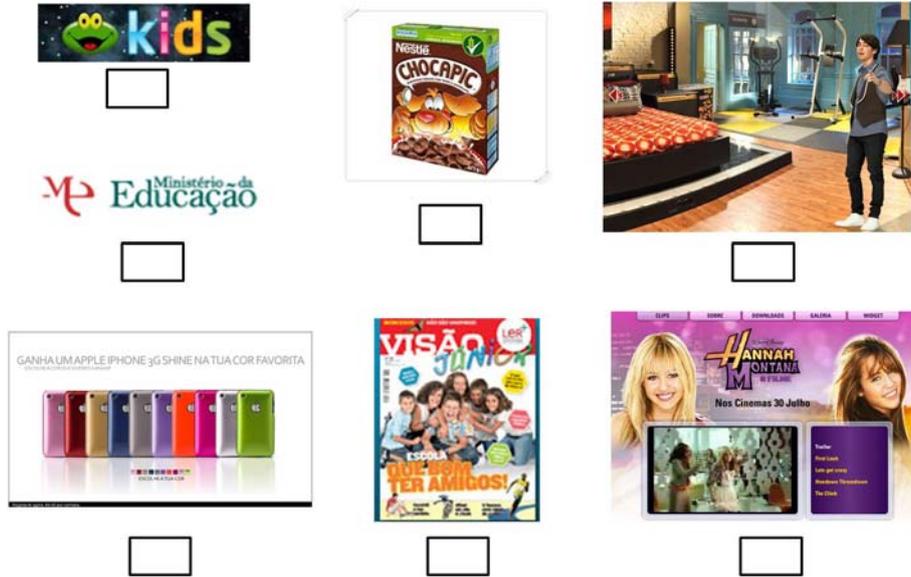
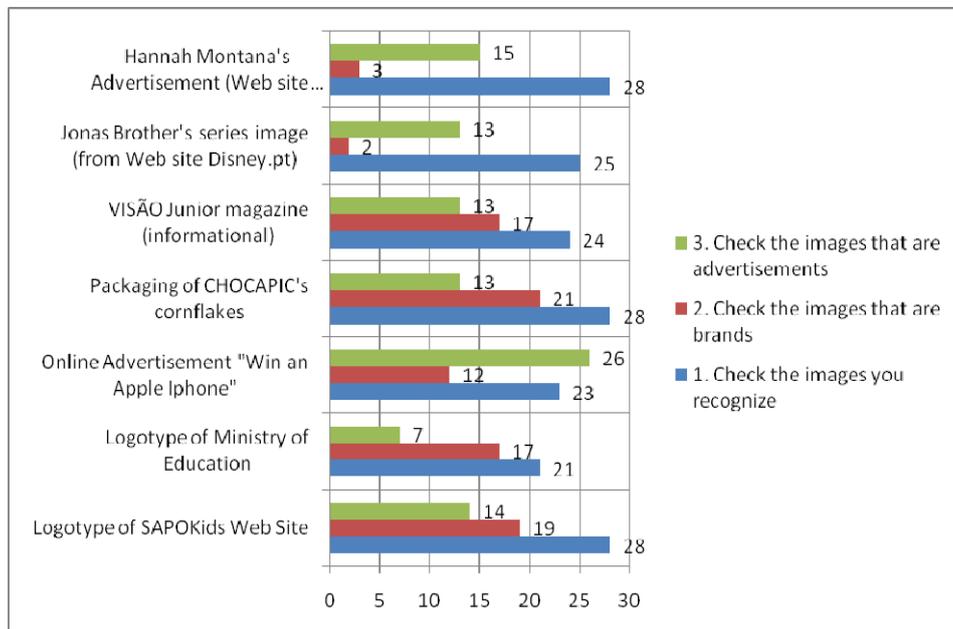


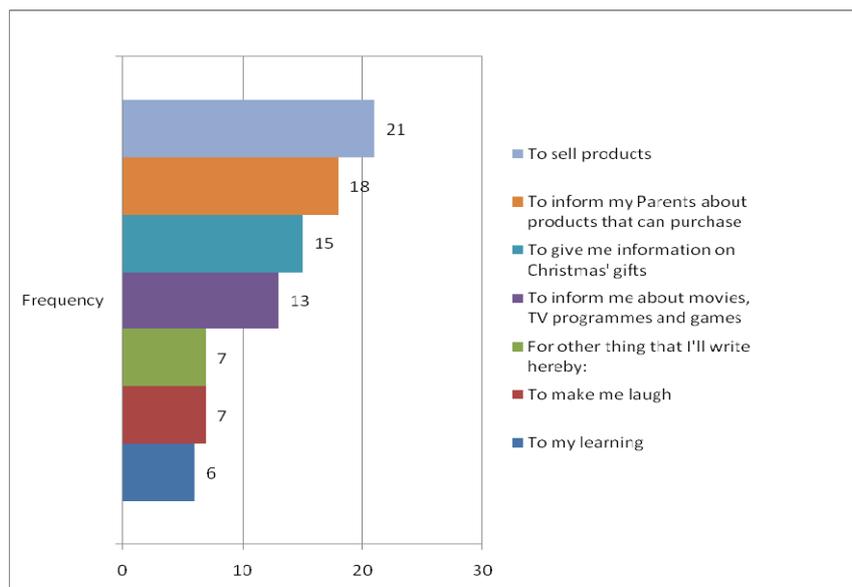
Figure 5 – Script format for brand and ads recognition

A total of 28 children aged 9 years participate on the study and the results are presented on Graphic 1.



Graphic 1- Absolute frequency of recognized images, brands and ads

The logotype of SAPOKids brand, the packaging of CHOCAPIC and the Hannah Montana's ad on the Disney Web site were recognized by all children (frequency=28). The Ministry of Education logotype is the less recognized image besides it is the Institution in charge for Children's Education.



Graphic 2 – What is advertising for?

The majority of children (21 in 28) answered that the ads main goal is “to sell products”. In second place they say that ads are useful “to inform my Parents about products they can buy” (18 in 28) and in 3rd place to “to inform me about movies, TV programs and games”.

It is important to notice that there are more children saying that the “Win an Apple I-Phone” image is an ad (what is correct) than children saying they recognize the image. Could this be explained by the recognition of the ad structure (Heading=Promise and image with Product/brand)? We think so but this issue will be explored on the individual interviews on the next chapter. The results of a multiple choice question about “what is advertising” are presented on Graphic 2.

To learn and to entertain are also advertisements' function, accordingly to 6 and 7 children respectively.

Under the category “other” one girl made the following statement: «I think it's a good idea to make advertisements because it's a good job and we can earn a lot of money! » And she made a draw to illustrate her point of view (Figure 6). This girl didn't choose any other option, giving her opinion on making ads as an economical activity and a well paid job. Another girl says that ads are for «to advertise TV

programs», using the correct terminology that was avoided on purpose by the researcher, and substituted by the option ads are useful “to inform me about movies, TV programs and games”.

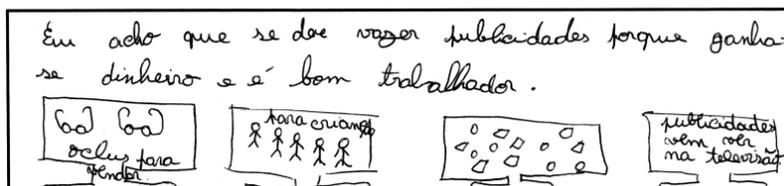


Figure 6 – A child comment and draw about advertisement

To “advertise” is part of children vocabulary even they didn’t learn that at school, according their teacher. Other children proposals for ads definition that appear on interviews were as follows:

Girl 1: -«ads are a way of earning money because we are facing a crisis...»

Girl 2: -«ads inform us that there are... (products) available»

Boy 2: - «ads inform me about products»

Boy 5: - «ads inform me about possible Christmas’ gifts»

Boy 4: - «ads entertain me»

Boy 3: - «ads are for (companies) earning more money».

All the above statements on ads function put those children on the role of buyer and consumer. The statement “to inform me about products” expands the image of an innocent child that socializes with ads, branded toys and games and other entertainment forms, to a consumer that understands the persuasive and informative role of advertisement. The statement «to have fun (to entertain me)» is a good definition for ads that use humor to capture audience attention and to convey a message and it reveals a more positive attitude than “to laugh”, as proposed by the researcher. The statement «ads are for (companies) earning more money» connects advertising to sales and particularly to sales increase as a consequence of ads, what is in fact a Corporate manager’s reason to invest in marketing communications. The boy that made such a comment, only selected “to sell products” and he refers to advertising as something external to him and his family (Parents); in fact he is saying that companies do make ads as a mean to sell products and win more money. He made a draw that illustrates his point of view (Figure 7).

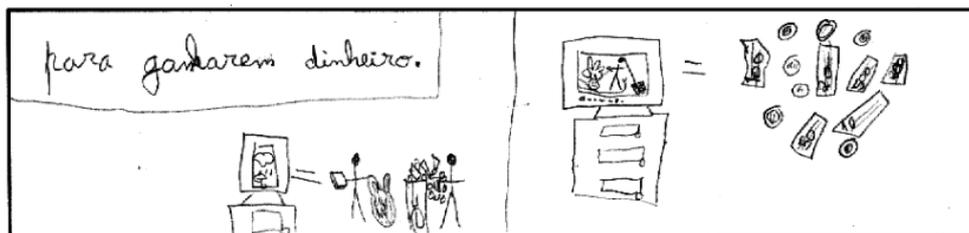
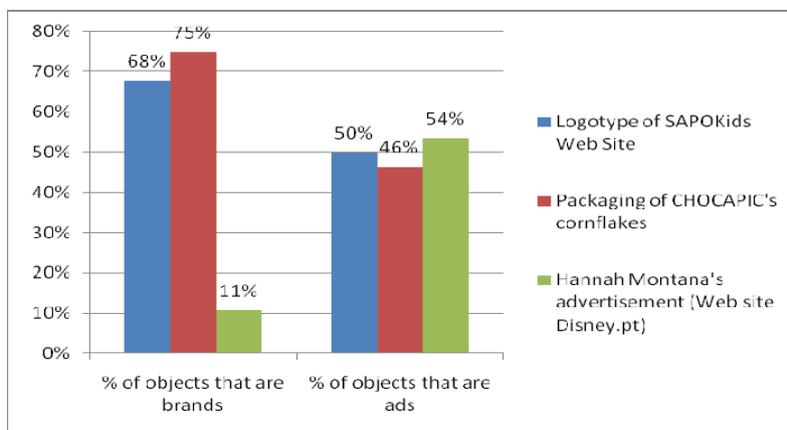


Figure 7 – «They (companies) make ads to earn more money. »

This kind of comments on brands denotes a reflexive agency, a critical analysis of brands and commercial activities. One can argue that these particular children, that belong to a family with economical and cultural resources above average, knows quite well the advertising function and recognize the outdoor format for instance, but they don't recognize at first, or didn't yet realized, that most of the entertainment forms they choose, are in fact "sponsored" by brands.

What is a brand? What is an ad? - Children Perspectives

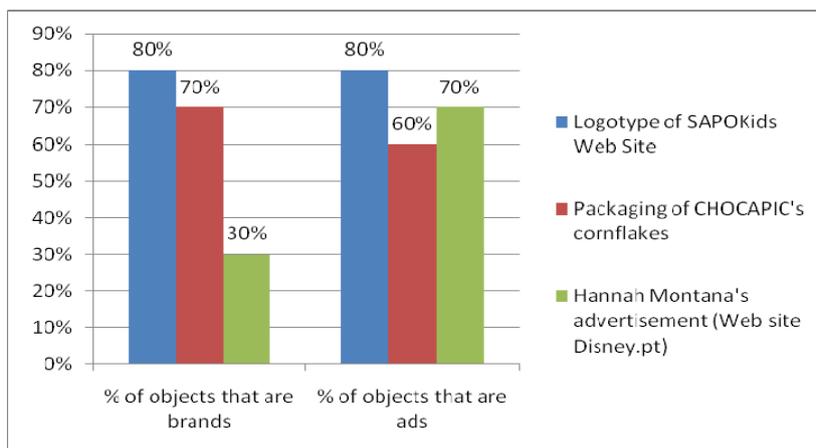
Taking in account only the image objects recognized by all children (frequency=28) in the first session, whether they said the images are also brands and ads is presented below in Graphic 3.



Graphic 3 Images that are brands and ads (among recognized ones) session 1

Between October 2009 and January 2010, a few sessions on media literacy took place, with particular focus on movie's characters as brands and merchandising from Disney. The Choice on Disney is for two main

reasons: children told the researcher that they preferred channel on TV is Disney Channel, as well they reveal a particular knowledge of all media products (online and offline). The researcher did apply the script used in the summative evaluation followed by individual interviews. This session took place three months after the summative evaluation. The results for the brand and ad categorization of images are different (Graphic 4) what suggest that children learned new concepts about brands from the classes: 30% of the children say that Hannah Montana is a brand (and a few said “a brand from Disney”) when compared with only 11% three months before. More children stated that SAPOKids is a brand (80%), what is correct and even more children recognized the Hannah Montana promotional content on the Web site as an ad (what is certainly true). The researcher told the children that even the Chocapic packaging is “the last ad on the supermarket shelf” and as a result more children select it as an ad.



Graphic 4 Images that are brands and ads (3 month later)

From the interviews, one can say that most of the children relate advertising with brands and make some kind of distinction among them, but not a clear one. Only a boy gave us a clear explanation of what a brand is, when the researcher asked him: Why is this “image” a brand? (Logotype of Portuguese Ministry of Education): «because this is an image that makes a representation of that. » - That? What is that? - (asked the researcher). - «That is Ministry of Education». This is a clear definition of what a symbol and a name do (brand): they attribute meaning to an Institution, company or product.

One girl stated that the “Apple I-Phone advertisement” is not a brand because «it only shows us that we can win a mobile phone! It’s a contest. Nobody wins anything, I don’t believe in that kind of ads...at all! ». A close relation between “selling a product” and a brand is endorsed in Hannah Montana and Jonas

Brothers web sites' images: «...they are brands because there are things for selling, like clothes...». But in a girl statement about Hannah Montana “not being a brand”, she says, in her opinion, a brand is a sign at a store front door and that image (from the site) is not a brand. It is interesting to notice that none of the children told us that Hannah Montana is not a brand because she is a rock star and a movie character. When we asked “why do you think Hannah Montana is not a brand?” two children answering: «maybe it is a brand... because we can buy things such as clothes...». Then, from those children perspective a brand is a representation of some sort of commercial activity.

An advertisement is an image that appears on computers and Internet without (my) request

When children looked at the I-phone advertisement (Figure 8) all of them say that is an advertisement because it appears on computers and Internet (without request). This particular ad has a traditional structure of an outdoor, a big print format that we can find on the streets. The researcher found this ad at Disney.pt Web Site, as well in an online pet lover's community where there are a lot of children as members. This ad that invites people to win an I-Phone is also an example of an unethical form of marketing. The goal is to entice impulsive behavior from consumers: in order to participate in the I-Phone contest, one should insert his/her phone number and in doing so he/she is contracting a service (not explained openly in the ad) for 4,00 Euros a week. In practice, the mobile phone operator charges the consumer for the third party service. How to quit that service is not obvious and not even accessible. Only a boy from our study referred to this kind of ads as “misleading advertisement”. In its words: «This is a mobile phone brand but that image is misleading advertising! ...I can read hereunder in the small letters that the registration is 4,00 Euros a week.»



Figure 8 Win an Apple IPHONE 3G; an advertisement at Disney.pt Web Site

Another shared definition of an ad among children is “a message that entices some action/response from people”. The image in Figure 9 is a content from the Portuguese version of Disney Channel Web Site that pretends to be editorial, but in fact it is a promotional content for the TV series (that can be seen every week at Disney Channel). One can see that this content looks like a puzzle game that invites children to play.

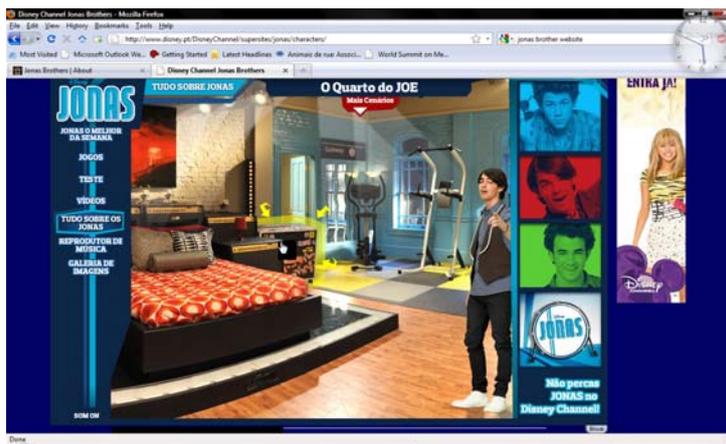


Figure 9 The interactive scenario in “all about Jonas” content

When the researcher asked children -“Why is Jonas Brothers an ad?”, one of the girls answered: «because it’s one of the Jonas Brothers...and that are arrows (links) and this is not a game». The same girl told that the image in Figure 8 is an ad «...because there are mobile phones on it and ...it appears on computers». In line with this statement another girl said that the “Apple I-phone image” is an ad because it advertises on the Web and they (advertisers) tell us to click...». Another comment relates that ad with the Internet: «I see these ads all the time on the Internet...it’s a way of companies making money». An another child expressed the following attitude against the Apple ad: «I used to watch this kind on the streets and on the web sites and online games...I never click but I need to wait for the game’s window. I don’t like ads! Sometimes the ad tells us a lie.»

Brand and advertisement contact

Another research question on focus on the children interviews was the point of contact with brands in their perspective. The researcher asked individually at each child (from a group with 4 girls and 2 boys). About The logotype of Ministry of Education (the less recognized image among children) the answers were as follows:

JP⁵: «I know it because my mother is a teacher and sometimes she goes to the Ministry».

BP: «I never saw that image...I don't know!»

PV: «I saw it from a few magazines...».

Researcher: - And do you know what it is?

PV: «No I don't!»

CJ: «I used to see that logo on the bookstores...and at home also...I think it is the Ministry of Education brand!».

Researcher: That's right! And what is The Ministry of Education? Do you Know what they do?

CJ: «No I don't.»

TC: «That is the brand of the Ministry...in charge for teachers.»

Even if only one girl told immediately that she never have seen before the logotype of Ministry of Education, two other children have seen it on bookstores and media but don't know what is it. Only two boys really could define that institutional "brand" that is charge for their Education.

In what relates to the Apple I-Phone advertisement, the main point of contact according all children is Internet (Web Sites and games):

JP: «Sometimes when I go play games on the Internet it kind of ad just appears...»

TC: «I used to be online on the web Sites and this image (the ad) is there!

The Hannah Montana and Jonas Brothers' images were identified by all children as seen on TV (Disney Channel) and on the Disney Web Site. One girl gave us detailed information about the Hannah Montana's image:

IB: «This is from one site where I used to be: Hannah Montana!

Researcher: - Hah, is there a site only for Hannah Montana?

IB: «Yes! There is the Disney Channel Web Site and there you find... and go to Hannah Montana's site.»

The CHOCAPIC corn flakes, a well known brand from Disney were recognized from all children from the mini-market and supermarket mainly, when they go shopping with Parents. All of them told the researcher that they saw the CHOCAPIC packaging because they saw it when they go after their preferred corn flakes. The act of shopping and the branded media on TV and Internet are responsible for the knowledge on brands, and certainly brands such us Disney and Nestlé have interest and powerful resources to establish durable relationship with children. We can make the hypothesis that Ministry of Education is an example, among other Institutions that care for children lives that are unknown and ignored by them because they don't see any interest in "things" that don't have any an immediate impact in their everyday present life.

⁵ In order to protect children privacy all the names are represented by only two letters.

Conclusion

The children community under study is an example of the rule of a commercialized childhood (not the exception) that characterizes our consumer society. The deep knowledge demonstrated by children about brands and Disney products in particular is the result of the development of a wide range of markets from big corporations that provide unique exposure to their products at different periods of people's lives (Kenway, Janet, 2008: 468).

The study shows that these children recognize ads by their structure even they don't know the product being advertised. Symbols with a name are brands for them as in the case of the Ministry of Education logotype. On the Internet, when using the Web Site "Friends of Real Colégio" some of the activities involve playing games chosen by children and approved by the researcher. Those games are accessed from external links and have advertising in banner formats. As it could be observed by the researcher, during the ethnographic study, the children remember vaguely those ads and "ignore them, do nothing on it, and close the pop up windows" when they encounter ads. A small group show a negative attitude on ads (they mislead, they lie). On the other end they recognize ads and brands as evidences of the commercial activities and as something that is unavoidable.

The previous knowledge demonstrated by children on brands and advertisement come from a diversity of sources: shopping with Parents, chatting with friends, walking on the streets, but in their discourse one can see that most of it comes from an everyday socialization with TV and Internet.

What the study reveals is that children don't have the critical literacy to understand that "they like what they like" (in entertainment media) because they have been surrounded by media from all the big corporations that nurture them since birth. That's what I will coin as the "sponsorization" of childhood.

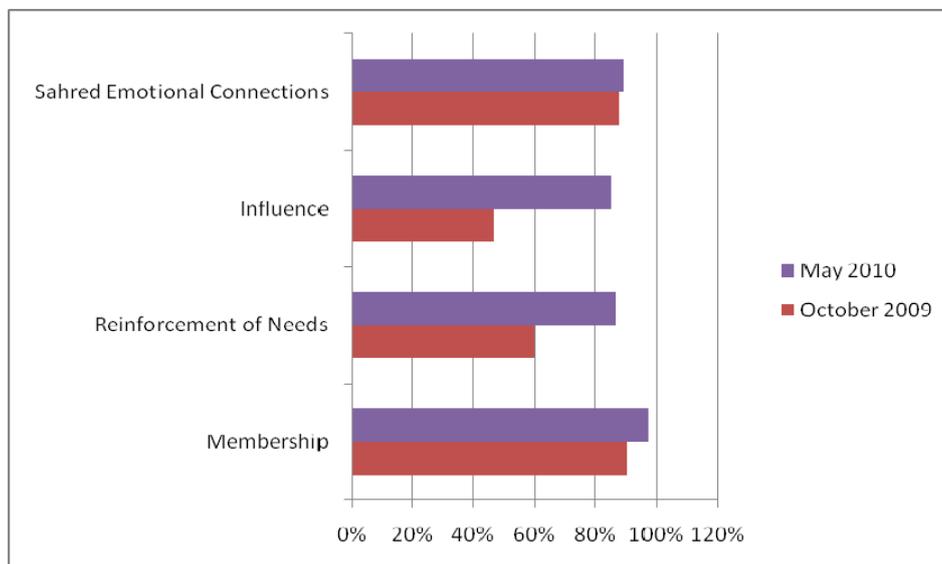
May be the most important thing that Educational Institutions need to teach on media programs is critical analysis of advertising and other forms of commercial messages, in order children can see the big picture of marketing strategies, not how Advertisers create ads as it is in most "media education" programs made with the collaboration of Media Industry.

Further research need to be done with diverse groups of children and from different social conditions, in order to find what's the real impact of it on their identities construction.

Another important object of analysis is the impact of "Amigos Real Colégio" Web site on the children's sense of community.

In May 2010, eight months after the beginning of the project, a new measure of sense of community was taken. The sense of community changed globally from 71% to 90% and the results for partial dimensions are presented on the Graphic 5.

We believe that the activities conducted at the Social Education for Media class contributed to the increase of the sense of community: the communication via email and forum has been increased, as well the participation of children (not only the “official” moderators and editors) on content creation. The dimensions that grew more were “influence” and “reinforcement of needs”. Increased influence or a sense of mattering could be explained by more networking among children to solve problems (sharing knowledge and opinions through the forum) than what is actually possible in a traditional learning environment. This could also be related with the feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group: increased reinforcement.



Graphic 5 – Evolution of Sense of Community

To a better understanding of these preliminary results on the impact of the online activities on sense of community, further research is needed with other online and offline communities.

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