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Stéphane Ganassali

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Status of brands in children's consumption: What letters to Santa posted on La Poste website tell us

Stéphane Ganassali - IAE – IREGÉ - Université de Savoie Mont Blanc

4 chemin de Bellevue - BP 80439 - Annecy-le-Vieux - 74944 Annecy - France

Email: sgana@univ-smb.fr – Tel: 0033 6 70 54 78 99

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What letters to Santa posted on La Poste website tell us.

Abstract

The purpose of the research is to identify some different consumption styles on the basis of a large collection of posts to Santa, written by some children and/or their families. One of our main interests focuses on the presence and weight of brands and licenses in their wish lists. We have had access to all the anonymous posts sent to Santa Claus on the French Post's website during the 2013 and 2014 Christmas holidays. We analyzed the nature of the wish lists as shown in the 43,000-post database, thanks to several textual data analysis techniques. Great heterogeneity was found among children's and family's postures regarding that specific ritual. The different types of emails reflect the meaning families associate to Christmas time but also, their different consumption styles or attitudes towards consumption: reasoned, educational, hedonistic or materialistic for example. When focusing on brands and licenses, we can also observe significant differences in the way families and children include them in their consumption decisions. Brands could have a very different weight in the Christmas wish lists and their natures reflect a number of various value transmission projects. The French market of Christmas children brands is rather stable and focuses on a few top leading global brands like *Playmobil*, *Barbie* or *Lego*. At least one of the ten leading brands is mentioned in half of the Christmas wish lists. The brands confirm they are very clearly gendered and associated to the children's ages. Peak time for brand desire is alleged to be reached between the age of 7 and 9. To our knowledge, our research is the first to analyze such a huge amount of spontaneous data to capture children's consumption styles and attitude towards brands. Thanks to our classification, a first typology of parental consumption styles has been identified.

Key-words

Introduction

Many families feel Christmas is an experience centered on children (Herpin & Orchard, 1996; Perrot, 2000; DeChant, 2002); such times are occasions for several episodes of physical and symbolic consumption. The letter to Santa takes center stage. For the child, it is an activity that marks the beginning of celebrations, blending belief and ritual (Levi-Strauss, 1952) and explaining their expectations. It therefore punctuates the passing of the holiday up to the time when they get to open their presents.

When writing to Santa, the child is often answerable on his good behavior; they express their wishes, endorse the prescriber's role to their own benefit. Since this practice most often involves an adult, they learn how to get organized to obtain what they want, and they act in their own particular way, as rational consumers.

This epistolary tradition has become greatly digitized and today takes the form of electronic mails or posts sent to websites dedicated to Santa. Among these sites, the oldest and most important one in Europe is undoubtedly the French Post's. Besides, we are beholden to it for the creation of Santa's secretariat (De la Ville & Georget, 2014).

What can be learnt from the study of posts sent to Santa, which contributes to understanding how children consume? Can the analysis of these messages help us identify child or family consumption styles? Is it possible, there, to spot the predominant brands of the market, matching their targets? Those are the main research topics that will be investigated in this article.

Thanks to a partnership with the French Post (*La Poste*), we were able to collect more than 40,000 of these messages, which we have analyzed through different text-mining techniques. Our research is of an exploratory nature and is based on textual data in order to characterize

messages, their styles, the number and the type of requested presents, and the share brands take in them.

In the first part, we introduce our theoretical framework: especially, the formation of child consumption culture and the letter to Santa as practical and revealing of a consumption style. In the second part, we explain the methodology we have selected, as well as the notion of “Consumer Generated Content”, with which we assimilate posts to Santa. Finally, in a third part we introduce our results. We offer, especially, an unpublished typology of posts, based on their objective characteristics. We study the link between the child’s age and brand quotations. Finally, we discuss these results and offer to see in posts to Santa a reliable indicator of brands popularity, since they come from children’s spontaneous initiative. We end by considering the limits and perspectives of this research.

1. Theoretical frame

1.1. The formation of a culture of child consumption

Children are not born consumers. Along with their cognitive development and the combined influence of their families, school, their peers and the media (Brée, 1993; Ji, 2002; Rodhain, 2004), they appropriate different cultural and symbolic worlds (Heilbrunn, 2014; Belk, Mayer & Driscoll, 1984) and learn how to consume (Ezan, 2009). So, it was shown that the symbolism of brands played an important role in the social and cultural relations developed by children (Nairn, Griffin & Gaya Wicks, 2008).

The family is not the sole entity that influences the young consumer, but it still takes center stage for a great number of learning activities and a privileged transmission space from one generation to the next (Gollety, 1999, 2007; Ladwein, Carton & Sevin, 2009). Children develop representations of consumption and brands, sorts of knowledge and skills (Moschis, 1985; Ladwein, 2005; Gollety, 2011). In that capacity, intergeneration influence corresponds to

“intra-family transmission of information, beliefs and resources from one generation to the next” (Moore, Wilkie & Lutz, 2002, p.17), which creates a trans-generational capital integrating the *“rules of a family how-to-consume know how, capitalized in the course of time and transmitted from one generation to the next”* (Ladwein, Carton & Sevin, 2009, p.19). Furnham (2008) speaks of “economic socialization” to characterize these forms of learning.

Studying decision making in families and more specifically the possible parent-child conflict for purchase requests, Nicholls and Cullen (2004) have proposed a framework for conceptualizing the parent-child purchase relationship: the *“Child-Parent Consumption Matrix”*. This framework focuses on the dynamics of desire for control and self-realization between parents and children in the retail context and identifies four situations: the parental power, the unresolved conflict, the consensual shopping and the pester power.

Undoubtedly, parents vary in their styles of consumer socialization with their children and these may lead to different attitudes towards consumerism and different consumption practices on the part of their progenies (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). Carlson and Grossbart (1988) have demonstrated that parental values, lifestyles and socialization patterns have some extensive effects on their children’s purchasing behaviors.

In that general context, Christmas has always corresponded to commercial hyper-consumption (Perrot, 2000; Dechant, 2002) because those times are partly centered on material abundance and can be seen as a celebration of consumption, materialism, and hedonism (Belk, 1987). As such, Christmas is an *“integral, and perhaps uniting, part of the consumer culture and consumer rituals of today”* (Okleshen, Baker & Mittelstaedt, 2011, p. 235). Within the family, children prove to become “the adults’ creditors” (Perrot, 2000) who receive presents as a kind of “generational ransom” (Piatton-Hallé, 2003), independently of the religious aspects of the Christian holiday. In some Brazilian children’s letters, Luna Batinga, de Rezende Pinto &

Pimenta Resende (2017) have found some substantial traces of materialism and secularism in the narratives and stories created by the children about Christmas. Presents, toys and games offered at Christmas accompany the child and contribute to their social and self-defining make-up (Rodhain, 2004). They fill in different functions: they participate of a tradition, contribute to the development of the subject's identity, and finally the way of asking for gifts may also constitute a form of training for the consumer child.

1.2 The practice of the letter to Santa as a practice revealing consumption styles

The letter to Santa, also in its digitalized form, is a practice standing at the meeting point between the material (since the child asks for presents) and the immaterial, since they address a mythical character: Santa. Parents are often the spindles of its circulation by assisting the child (Otnes *et al.*, 1994). This is a difficult practice to quantify, but it is possible to grasp the way it is approached according to the age of the child. Before age 6, the child is capable of choosing photos of toys or drawing them. As early as 6-7 years old, they can write to Santa with the help of a third party. Children stop believing in Santa generally somewhere by 8 years old (Otnes *et al.*, 1994). Mainly, the children who write to Santa are therefore in the 5 and 8/9 years bracket.

The letter formalizes the child's wishes and requires a measure of skill to process the information available around their environment. The consumption skills training approach allows us to envisage the writing of the letter to Santa from several angles. To write their letter, the child must think, sort out information, choose and therefore exercise a form of rationality (Gollety, 2011). Writing the letter to Santa constitutes a joint consumption practice, in which the child, aided by an adult or an older member of his close circle, participates in an amusing, creative and somewhat magical activity, since, by contacting Santa, they can see some of their wishes are granted.

The contributions of socio-historical and cultural psychology (Vygotski, 1978) permit to envisage the young consumer's socialization process through modalities of participating in joint consumption activities. De la Ville and Tartas (2011) identify four approaches to competences: the apprentice rational consumer; the active participant in the joint consumption activities; the apprentice user of symbolic dimensions of brands and the creative participant in the development of the meaning of joint consumption practices. The suggested theoretical frame envisages the post to Santa as a joint practice, pregnant with a consumption intention, resulting from the wishes of various stakeholders (the parents and the children).

The study of epistolary productions addressed to Santa constitutes a rather old research topic. In early 19th century England, tradition consisted in burning Christmas letters so that they could be carried by magic all the way up to the North Pole. The development of large mail systems soon enabled people to write letters, and more recently emails or posts, to mythical Christmas characters. In children's productions – see Halkoaho and Laaksonen (2009) – it is also worth pointing out there is an anchoring onto the common place and materialism on one hand, or on the imaginary and the mythical on the other. As a fully-fledged consumption position¹, the letter to Santa can be an exhortation to the paradise of opulence, the deluge of presents (the record of our 2013 French-speaking posts is as high as 50 presents), or a more thoughtful request, concentrated on one or several object(s) they have longed for over a long time.

Our starting hypothesis is that these “speech acts” (Searle, 1972) constitutes tangible traces of families' consumption styles, which have, to our knowledge, not yet been, from that angle, the focus of much study. We mention families and not children because we have definitely noted that a majority of the posts concerning 5- to 10- year old children had obviously been written

¹ Some parents refuse to celebrate Christmas and disapprove of all the rituals around it. They see it as an act of resistance against the consumer society (Mikkonen, Moisander & Firat, 2011).

in the presence of an adult. Spelling, syntax and even explicit contents clearly point out that one of the parents took the place of the child, has accompanied them or even sometimes addressed Santa directly when writing the letter (see table 1).

Type of messages	Verbatim
Message probably written by a parent. The child is 5 years old and there is no spelling mistake, or of syntax.	<i>Dear Santa, I have been very good this year. I have brushed my teeth and hair. I study hard at school and I really listen to our mistress. For Christmas, I will give up sucking my teat and I will leave it to you so you bring me more presents. I am going to make efforts to act more politely in future, and more wisely. I would like you to bring me Pet Shops and Zoobles, I would like a medium-sized plush rabbit, the Playmobil farm and plush cats, Pokemon figurines, a batman and Lego friends. Thank you, Santa. Lots of hugs and see you very soon.</i> Maïa (5)
Message clearly written by a parent	<i>Dear Santa I am writing on behalf of my little Rose, who is a very good little girl, Please, bring her some gifts. She gives you big hugs Rose's mum (6)</i>
Message clearly written by a child – There are a lot of mistakes and the message was drafted in little structured fashion.	<i>Hello Santa, I'm doing well, how do you manage to travel all around the world, it is a long journey, I think, though I have never told you so now you know, I love you a lot because you travel a lot for our sake Santa, and I am really looking forward to see you coming to our home. I looooooove you Santa Tiziana (9).</i>

Table 1 – Different types of messages written by the child, the parent or jointly.

Then, based on the children's wish-lists, we believe that it is possible to measure the way families feel about brands, and the place they grant them in their consumption of toys and products for their children in a broader sense. By wondering about the status of speaking out, as Clarke (2008) suggests, we can hypothesize that the family as a whole or one of its members, (perhaps the school, too), is partly "behind" the child writing to Santa. Via several textual analyses, we shall explore and analyze families' "programmatic intentions" relatively to consumption and brands, such as shown in the 43,000 posts database written in French. We will try to determine what families try to transmit to the child, whose trace can be found in the

contents and style of posts to Santa. We will see whether – as suggested by Caron and Ward (1975) - differences in children's product desires and parent's patterns of responding to requests may reflect fundamental value orientation of parents and children.

Some previous research suggest that a majority of parents would disfavor to identify Christmas gifts in terms of popular brands for their children and would hold low evaluations of those brands in that specific consumption situation (Clarke, 2008; Clarke and McAuley, 2010). Thanks to the wish lists, we will especially measure the way families feel as regards to brands, and the place they grant them in their consumption of toys and child products in a broader sense.

Our research hypotheses lead us to formulate the following propositions. First of all, we believe that the analysis of all posts should enable us to identify a "post template" which would represent the standard speech of a French child in his request to Santa Claus (Proposition 1). We then suggest (Proposition 2) that there are some great disparities in the form and content of the posts to Santa, on their main indicators (number of gifts, budget, place of brands, etc.). We also believe that the posts should reveal a strong presence of brands and licenses, and that this should vary according to the gender and age of the focal child (Proposition 3). Finally, on the basis of the posts' contents, we consider that it will be possible to highlight several family consumption styles (Proposition 4), as they are expressed during that specific Christmas time.

2. Research methodology

2.1. The CGCs at the service of marketing decision-making

Social media today make up a set of supports that can be used as a source of assistance to marketing decision. With the progress of the media and online technologies, consumers increasingly share their opinions and their product experiences on various online platforms,

such as opinion and advice sites, community sites, forums, claims platforms and social networks. Websites or social media constitute privileged areas to accommodate promotional campaigns or events, on which occasions consumers can live a particular experience, but also interact and express their desires, their needs or their dreams (Gaucher & Lamon, 2014).

This whole set of supports has been brought together under the term “consumer-generated contents” or CGC (Muniz & Schau 2011). In comparison with consumer surveys, CGCs are spontaneous, passionate, widely available, not very expensive and easily accessible. Some are a private conversation between the consumer and the firm: this applies somehow to our posts on *La Poste* website. CGCs are expanding and companies find them easier to manage and monitor than surveys. Besides, they sometimes represent hundreds of thousands of consumers’ contributions to online forums. As such, they tend to represent the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki 2004) and marketing specialists can use CGCs as quality sources of insights on consumers’ experiences and desires (Tirunillai & Tellis, 2014; Homburg, Ehm & Artz, 2015).

In the field of marketing, research works published until then were mainly interested in showing how the analysis of CGCs could allow identifying or validating brands positioning (Tirunillai & Tellis, 2014, Lee & Bradlow, 2011). They are also a favored ground for the study of brands/consumers relations (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Cova & Pace, 2006, Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2013). Many researches also suggested that these sources of information perfectly contribute to the identification of important aspects in the purchasing decision (Lee & Bradlow, 2011; Clauzel & Montargot, 2013; Stringam & Gerdes, 2010 and Thomaz *et al.*, 2017, regarding the tourist sector). CGCs were eventually considered as an interesting tool for predicting sales, via the analysis of correlations between the volume and quality of reviews and sales (Larceneux, 2007 and Clemons, Gao & Hitt, 2006).

In our research, we offer to approach posts to Santa as a form of CGCs, which partly reveals children' and their families' relationships to consumption, brands, and to toys in particular. The CGCs analysis methods are organized around the traditional dichotomy between either quantitative or qualitative techniques. The "netnographic" approach is sometimes used, as in the works of Brodie *et al.* (2011) on the consumer's commitment or in the research by Cova & Pace (2006) on brand communities. The traditional qualitative methods, which use in-depth discussions, can also be resorted to (see Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2013 for example). The analysis of textual data – with a quali-quantitative approach – constitutes the most common method used to capture CGCs' contents and significations. These text-mining methods are particularly relevant to capture objective insights within large textual data-bases (Bolden & Moscarola, 2000; Ganassali, 2008).

2.2. Santa's site at the French Post

Thanks to our partnership with the French Post (*La Poste*), we had access to all posts (made anonymous) addressed to Santa on *La Poste* Website over the 2013 and 2014 New Year's holiday. Access to Santa's site is straightforward, and the site, thanks to its ergonomics, aesthetics and jolly tone, encourages the child to write to him (see <http://pere-noel.laposte.fr/>). We have quantified the nature of orders to Santa such as shown in the 43,000 posts base, written in French. Thanks to an extraction of the lists of presents requested by 5- to 10- year old children, we try to grasp families' feelings in relation towards consumption, their approval or their degree of resistance to brands, their attraction for the educational or entertaining nature of games, and we strive to spot and describe "consumption styles" in a systematic way. Thanks to some socio-demographic indicators, we can analyze brand positioning as regards a gender and a given age. A set of methods to analyze textual data was mobilized (content, lexical and typological analyses, as well as the extraction of specific verbatim, notably) according to the research propositions we were interested in (Ganassali, 2008).

2.3. Content analysis designed to qualify the nature of messages

Content analysis was mobilized first of all in order to encode a random set of samples from a thousand of posts, according to a definite code-book. It allows determining the nature of the message: predetermined short or long wish-lists, with a nice word in them or the reminder of an order. According to directives – based notably on spelling, syntax and the supposed young writer’s age (see Table 1) – we also aim to understand whether the message could have been written by the child themselves. Regarding a definite order, other coding variables are quantitative and permit to clearly establish the nature of the wish-lists written by children. Most of the dimensions we noticed and calculated have already been studied in previous works (see Marcon *et al.*, 1994; Otnes *et al.*, 1994 or Halkoaho & Laaksonen, 2009, notably): it has to do with the number of requested present(s), the budget for them (ratio between the total budget of the list and the number of listed presents), the weight of brands and of licenses (from 0 to 100 % of the wish-list), and the weight of educational presents, according to the classification made by Vincent (2000), in between 0 and 100 % of the list. The extraction of specific verbatim permits to illustrate and reinforce our understanding and interpretation of the trends we notice.

The lists of requested presents enable us, for example, to measure families’ feelings towards brands, and the place they grant them in concrete terms in the consumption of children’s toys and products in a broader sense. We could say that posts also record “brand relevance in a given category”, according to the definition by Fischer *et al.* (2010), i.e. the global role played by brands in consumers’ decision processes in a particular category (games and toys, here). This approach can also be found in the research by O’Cass & Clarke (2002) and by Otnes *et al.*, (1994). The wish-list volume and declared value (and therefore approved), its educational or entertaining elements will also be considered by us as concrete signs of the desired consumption modes, such as expressed via the expression allowed to the child (whether it is feigned or possibly controlled) when writing their wish-list to Santa.

is possible, by distributing the most frequent words in a logical order, to reconstruct a kind of “letter template”, such as the French child would have written it to Santa in 2013 and 2014. *“Good morning dear Santa. I hope you’re good. My name is Lea and I am 6 years old, I have been a good little girl with my daddy and mom, I have studied hard at school. I would like you to bring me these presents: a Barbie doll, a DS game, and a touch tablet. Thank you and see you soon. I love you and I give you lots of hugs”.*

3.2. The great heterogeneity of posts written to Santa

The first descriptive results from the Sphinx software processing operations point out the great heterogeneity of posts written to Santa. Apparently, only in 44 % of cases are these actually written by a child. Whatever the writer’s identity, it has been noticed that $\frac{3}{4}$ of posts constitute an order for a present or presents and most often are definite wishes (65 % cases), sometimes not so (10 % of all messages). The medium list length slightly exceeds 4 toys, with a rather high dispersion (standard deviation: 3.2). The total budget of an order also varies greatly (standard deviation: 175) around a 185-euro average. Brands (or licenses) are heavily present, at the rate of 2.5 units per wish-list, i.e. a 61.5 % presence rate on average. On the whole, the share of educational toys reaches only 20 %.

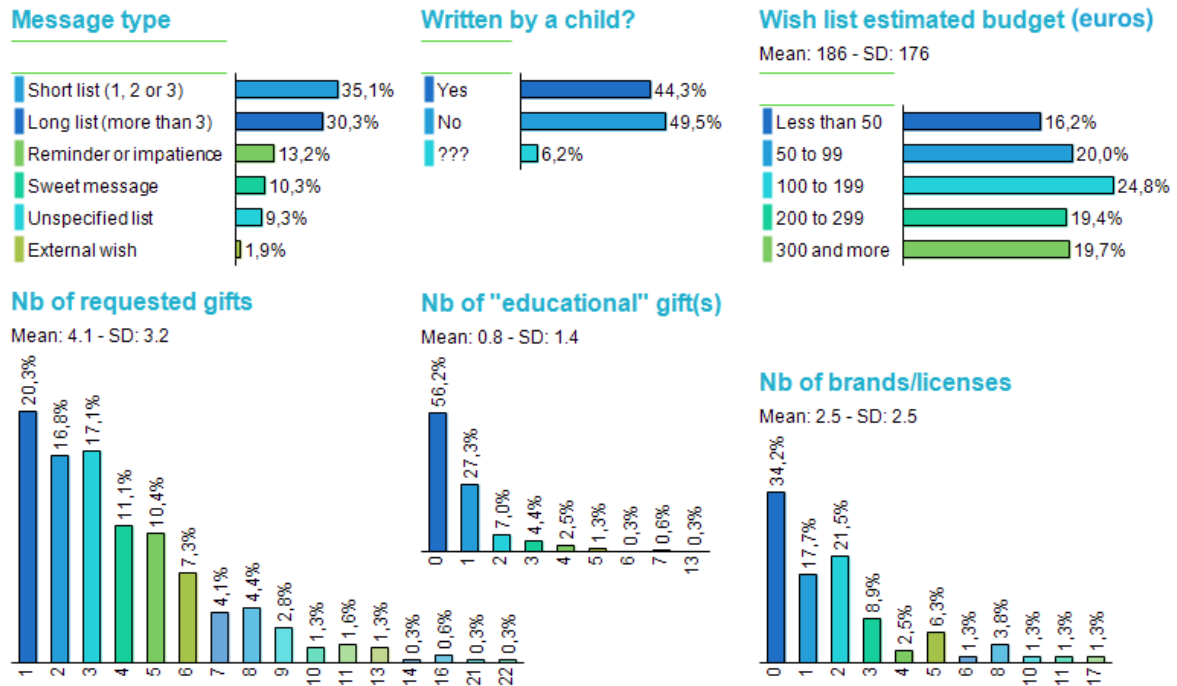


Figure 2 – Descriptive results of posts content analysis

3.3. The prevailing Christmas brands

The lexical analysis carried out on 43,000 posts points out the top 10 brands listed on the 2013 and 2014 Christmas markets: *Playmobil*, *Barbie* and *Lego*, followed by *Monster High* and *Wii*. The first one is to be found in 9.1 % and the second in 8.3 % of posts. One third of posts contain at least one brand in the top 10 list, which are also present in nearly half the children's orders. We can also point out great stability in brand presence between 2013 and 2014. The only significant difference worth mentioning is an increase in *Pokemon* and a drop in *Barbie* dolls.

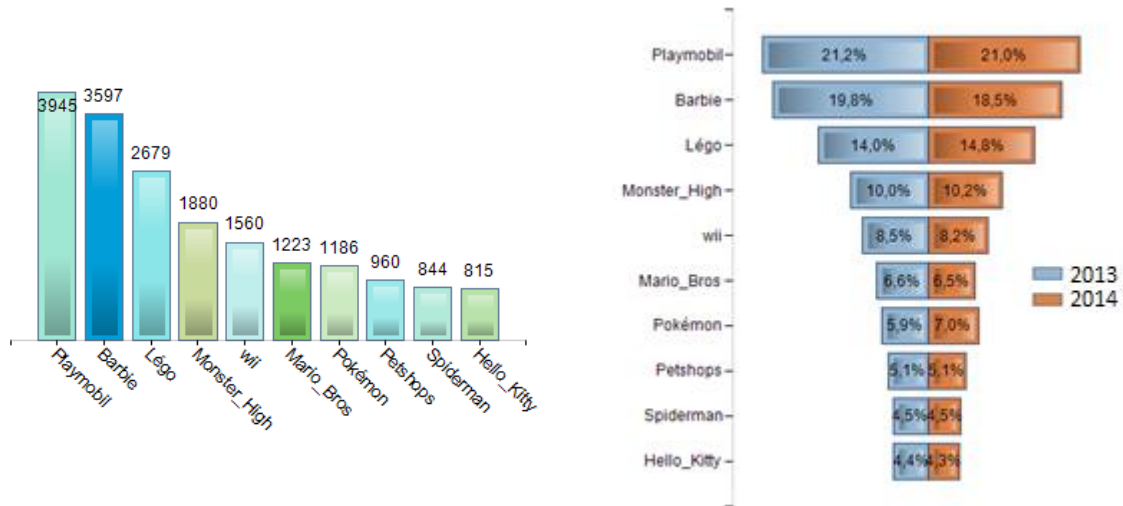


Figure 3 – The 10 most quoted brands

Brands according to gender and age

The posts database contains a number of socio-demographic information, such as age, sex and zip code. It is then possible to observe which brands are ordered according to these criteria. As can be seen on the factorial card below (see figure 4), we can confirm that the huge majority of brands presented at Christmas-time are deeply marked by gender (Richardson & Simpson, 1982; Karniol, Stuemler-Cohen & Lahav-Gur, 2012). Some, such as *Playmobil* or *Storio* (VTech console) are a little more central, just as *Uno*, *Monopoly* or *Operation* parlor games.

Brands are also tightly linked to the child's age. At about 5 or 6 years of age, little girls order *Hello Kitty* or *Zhu Zhu Pets*; little boys ask for *Transformers* or *Power Rangers*. At about 10 years of age, they switch to other brands. Girls dream of *Kidi Secrets* or of *Just Dance*, while boys are, from then on, keen on *Skylanders* or *Giants* figurines or the *X Box* game console.

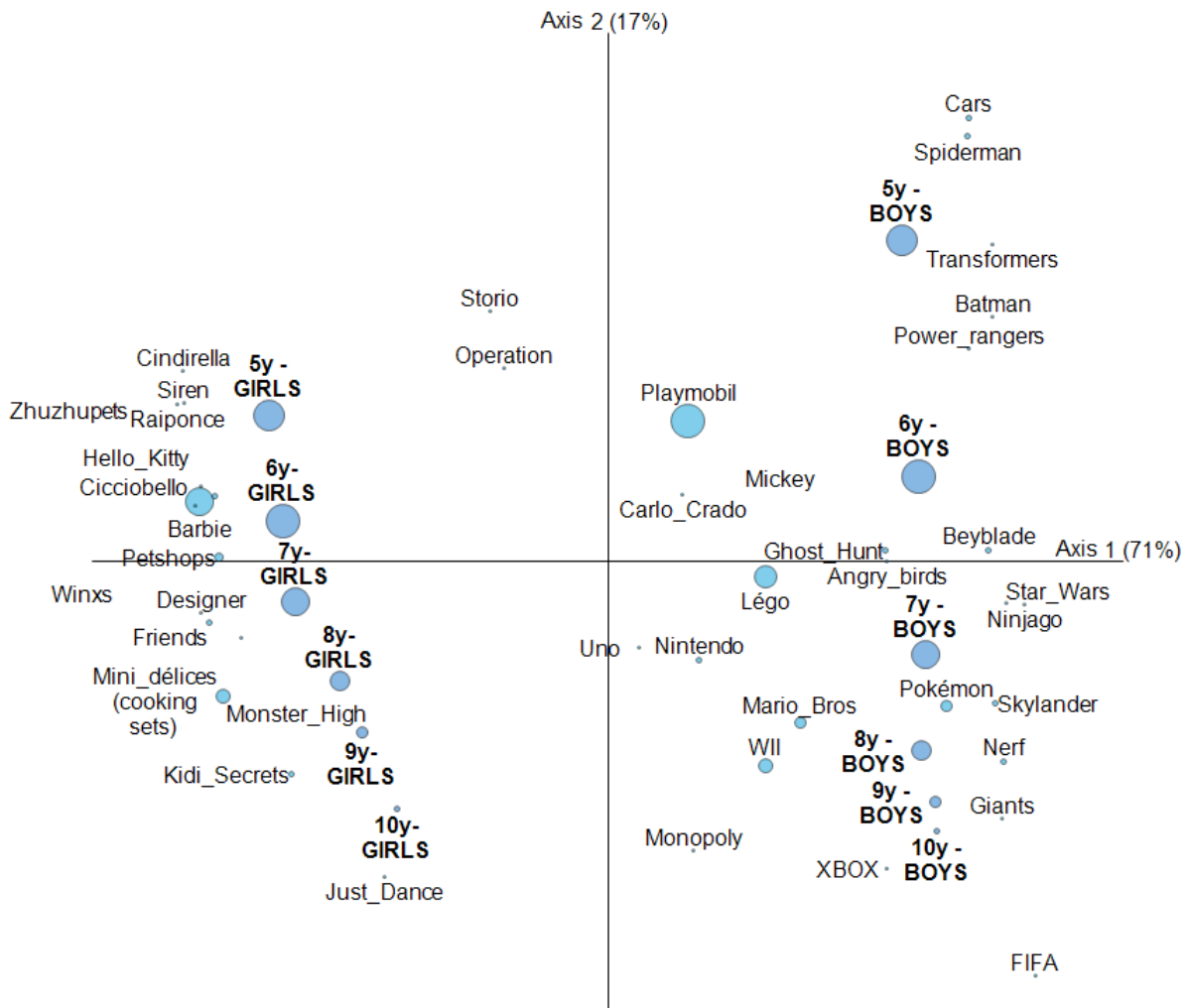


Figure 4 – Brands ordered according to gender and the child's age

Weight of brands according to age

From the 250 most present brands in the corpus, we have calculated a variable measuring the number of brands to be quoted. Since then, this indicator allows analyzing the weight of brands in the list, according to the child's gender and age, for example. This comparison (significant Student tests) points out to us that brands peak penetration rates in this age group is between 7 and 9 years (see figure 5).

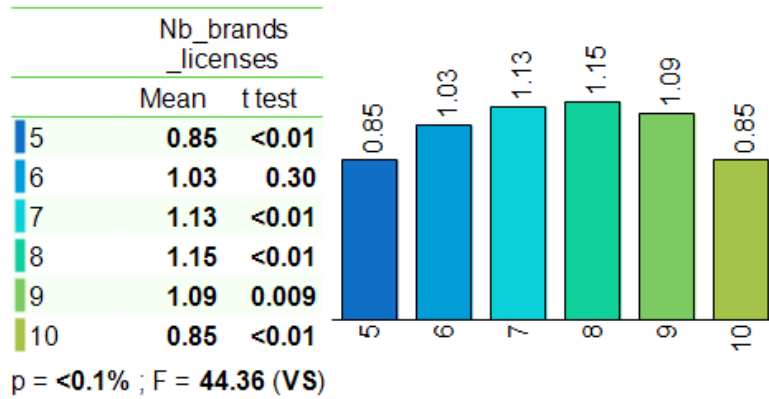


Figure 5 – Number of brands quoted by children according to age

3.4. Different styles of consumption

In order to find the different consumption styles, based on the messages that constitute definite orders (2/3 of mails), we have performed an automatic classification according to the “k-means” method, by taking into account four numerical variables (number of ordered presents, budget per present, share of brands and their educational weight) from the content analysis described in paragraph 2.3.

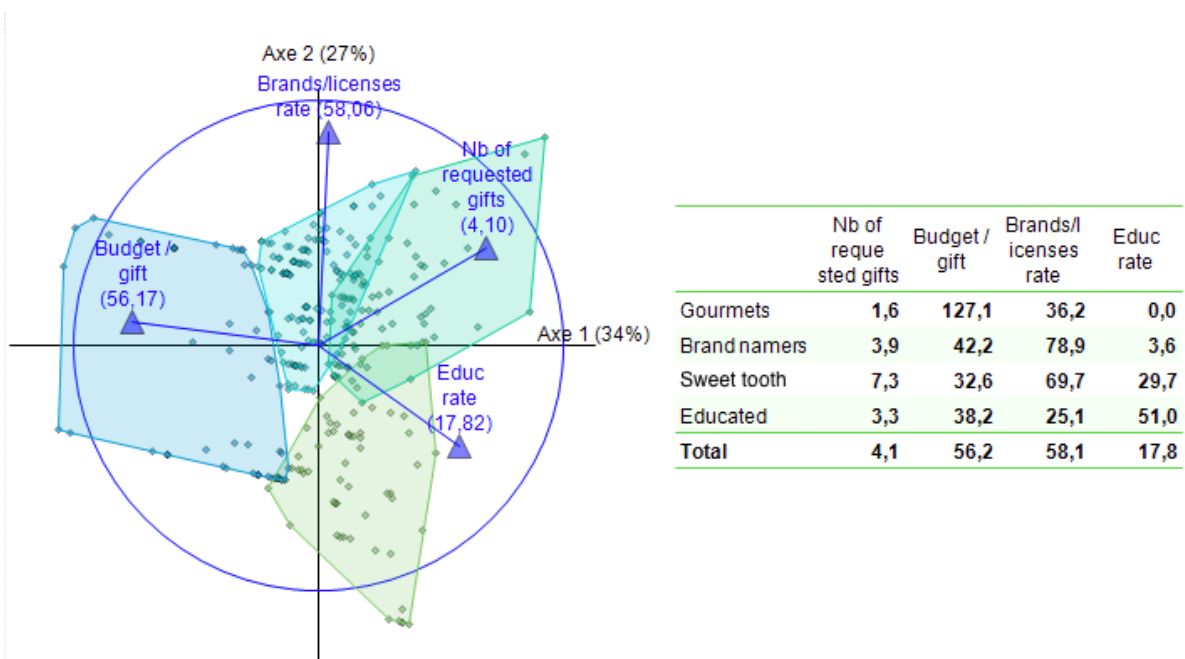


Figure 6 – The identified groups and their values on numerical variables.

We obtain four segments to be differentiated according to the following characteristics:

Group description	Specific verbatim
<p>The “GOURMET” group stands out with the limited number of gifts (1.6) but the per gift budget is very high (€ 127). The share of educational gifts is non-existent, but the electronic component is very high: tablets, consoles or even computers. In this category, children seem to be authorized to get expensive high-tech equipment, which is sometimes reserved to adults. Parent control is average: centering on a limited number of gifts but not necessarily on their contents or the associated symbolic meanings. The child is entitled to ask for objects of high financial value. They can receive gifts of great value such as a tablet or a laptop computer. An educative objective might be considered, connected to training for technological tools but remote from the transmission of consumption ways that could be called reasoned ones.</p>	<p><i>Hello Santa, my name is Maelle, I am 8 years old, I believe I have been good all year long (my mother won't confirm it has been 100% of times), I am writing to you because, in my wildest dreams, I wish to ask you for: 1 ipad, 1 42-inches LCD, 1 Samsung tab 2. As for the scooter, I can wait till I am 14... Thank you, I give you big hugs. I'll be expecting you by my fireplace - don't worry, I won't light the fire. (Maelle – 8 – Girl)</i> <i>Hello Santa, I have been a little naughty this year but I am a friendly little girl and my parents say this is why I can make a wish-list, for you to know what I want: a samsung tablet, an iphone, or a wii. Thank you Santa and see you soon, I hope. (Laetitia – 8 – Girl)</i> <i>Hi Santa; I have not been very good this year but I promise I'll get better. I am asking you to bring me a PSP. Thank you, Santa. Lots of kisses. (Yvan – 9 – Boy)</i></p>
<p>The “EDUCATED” group stands out on account of the great weight conferred to educational gifts: a little over 50% of all gifts as against 18% on average. The gifts on the wish-list are more conventional, or even “genuine”, such as remote (or not) controlled cars, circuits, garages, bicycle or books. It is in this category that the highest expression of a “concerted cultivation” can be found in the transmission drive (Lareau, 2003). The gifts on the list must be designed to take part in a global educational objective: the number of gifts on the list is reasonable, as is the corresponding budget, the share of brands and licenses is rather small, and toys are chosen for their didactic value. While they are recreational, games are rather “conventional” – a garage or a circuit.</p>	<p><i>I wish to receive a crane, the linx game, a circuit, as well as parlour games. Thank you Santa!!! See you soon!!! (Mathéo - 5 – Boy)</i> <i>Hello Santa. I have sent you a letter but I doubt you have received it, so I am writing you another one. As I was saying, I have worked hard at school and I have been a good little girl. I would like to get a pram, and a book, to practice my reading skills. Lots of hugs, Santa; I love you so much! (Angélique – 7 – Girl)</i> <i>Hello Santa, my name is Enzo and I am 7. Here is my wish-list: I would like to have a racing-car circuit, with a remote-controlled car, and a big box of felt-pens plus sheets of drawing-paper as well. Thank you Santa. (Enzo - 7 – Boy)</i></p>
<p>The “SWEET TOOTH” group is somewhat special on account of the number of gifts on the wish list, quite above average (7.3 on</p>	<p><i>Hello Santa, how are you, you who brings us gifts. Here is my wish list, and I hope you send them all to me: I want a telephone and a</i></p>

<p>average). The per gift budget is rather low and the weight of brands is rather high all the same (70%). These brands and licenses seem more conventional or more “acceptable” such as Lego or Star Wars games. This category is fairly close to the previous one regarding brand presence. It is higher than the previous one in terms of wish-list volume and total budget (nearly €250 on average). The sole resistance can be found only regarding the nature of brands and the desire to integrate a somewhat educational component in the listed games, like <i>Lego</i> or <i>Studio Designer</i> boxes – which generate high costs and volumes, however.</p>	<p><i>headphone to listen to music and a Barbie doll with all the corresponding accessories, plus a blond wig, a real one for adults, a secret diary with a lock and key, a baby bed with a baby inside. Have a merry Christmas and don't forget to bring me all my gifts. Bye for now, (Aurélie – 9 – Girl) Dear Santa, I would like these gifts: a Flash mac queen, playmobil, trash pack characters, a Lego crane, Lego star wars, a buggy, a tractor, a 4-wheel drive SUV, a barbecue party, eat-it-all, a carpet for the car, a pinder box, a Lego ship and Lego star wars, cars, a waste truck, a racing car circuit, a mad shark, a helicopter, a camera, a marble circuit, a fire engine, a remote controlled boat, a DS3 circuit. Thank you so much and see you soon. (Maël – 6 – Boy) Dear Father Christmas, I hope you are good. As you have seen, I have worked hard at school. This is my wish list: real tools at Grannie Fanfan and Grandad Patrick's home, blokus at Auntie Caroline's, a puzzle at Grannie Lulu's, gormitis and a castle at Grannie Coco and Grandad Jean-Pierre's, the Dr drek-crowd zombie at my parents' home, a world encyclopedia at Auntie Tiffany and Uncle Jérôme's, a nerve pistol with records at Uncle Franck and Auntie Jess's. Thank you in advance, Santa. Lots of hugs. (Aaron – 6 – Boy)</i></p>
<p>Lastly, the “BRAND NAME-DROPPERS” regroups wish lists where the weight of brands and licenses is the highest (nearly 80%). The educational dimension is almost non-existent (4%). Star brands or licenses like <i>Playmobil</i> are approved, as well as <i>Barbie</i> dolls or <i>Pokemons</i>, but also <i>Spiderman</i>, <i>Mario</i> or <i>Skylanders</i> and <i>Ninjago</i>. Clearly, this style is close to hyper-consumption. Here, education seems to betray the choice of letting the child “grow naturally” (Lareau, 2003), permitting them to react freely to the stimuli from their environment, which stimulates and encourages them to get a great number of things, which are selected and true to commercial and media popular gadgets. The consumption concept to be transmitted here is, as it were, definitely liberated and unabashed, rather hedonistic and recreational, more than formative.</p>	<p><i>Dear Santa, I have been very good this year but I haven't made much effort. I have studied hard at school and my grades are good. I take care of my little sister and Daddy and Mommy are proud of me. This is what I would like for Christmas: could you bring me the Lord of the Rings Lego box (the Ouroukaïs blacksmith's, the Moria mines and the Ouroukaï army), GhostBuster, Pokemon figurines, and playmobil cavemen. Thank you Santa, and see you very soon (Léo – 9 – Boy) Hello Santa, I have been very good, this is what I am ordering for Christmas: a few beyblade tops, car racing games, playmobil pirates and cops, the mad chef game. Thank you Santa, I love you so much. (Quentin – 6 – years – Boy) Dear Santa, for Christmas, I would like an ice-watch (pink bottom and white wristband), the mirogolo game, the werewolf game and the playmobil Café on the harbor. So, on December 25th, could you bring me all the gifts I have ordered? Thank you, Santa!!!!!! (Lisa – 9 – Girl)</i></p>

hyper-consumption, sensitivity to brands (to the North) and a more educated, more traditional consumption (to the South).

Discussion – conclusion

By means of economic socialization, intergenerational transmission but also normative peer pressure as well as stimuli from stakeholders in the market, children gradually learn how to become consumers and develop a relationship with material things, as well as their own attitudes in relation to a number of brands, plus their own consumer style. The hatching of this consumption culture is interesting to analyze because a great number of individuals' psychological and behavioral foundations are settled during childhood. In many countries, Christmas is a time for hyper-consumption by children and families, when children order and then receive presents. The very widespread ritual of writing a letter to Santa, as a result, highlights a telling expression of their consumption inclinations.

Our research has enabled us to explore the digitized form of the letter to Santa, by analyzing a very big quantity of CGC data (43,000 posts). What we learn from the huge collection of posts to Santa is that there is a large heterogeneity in children's and family's postures regarding that specific ritual. The different types of emails reflect the significance families associate to Christmas time, but also, as we later saw, their different consumption styles or attitudes towards consumption: more reasoned, educational, hedonic or materialist, for example.

When focusing on brands and licenses (as a relevant expression of consumption lifestyles), we can also observe significant differences in the way families and children include them in their consumption decisions. Contrary to what some previous works suggest, brands could have a very different weight in the Christmas wish list (or order), and their natures (like for *Kapla* or *Skylanders*, for example) reflect various value transmission projects.

Theoretical contributions

This work has enabled us to spot posts styles that betray different strategies implemented by children. Four categories of messages (Gourmets, Sweet tooth, Educated, Brand name droppers) identified in this research highlight both brand awareness and the joint nature of the consumption practices of writing a letter to Santa (De La Ville and Tartas, 2011), since it is actually true that the games and toys corresponding to the “educated” category seem to result from parents’ influence.

Our results validate the idea that the child-consumer displays rationality (Gollety, 2011). Messages regrouped under the “gourmet” category betray the wish to ask for a single present, and a relatively expensive one. In this type of messages, the child integrates the concept of the street value of their requests, and they isolate it so as to increase their chances of getting their wishes granted.

The way of asking for presents, together with polite forms of address, tokens of tenderness and strong request structuring reveal a form of socialization. If these results confirm Roederer’s (2008) on the negotiation styles mobilized by the child, they are useful as they result from a *big data* approach that reinforces their robustness. Moreover, this research has enabled us to link writer’s age to brand quotations, and these occupy a very important place in children’s wishes at Christmas time.

Methodological contributions

At methodological level, the analysis of textual data can be validated in its capacity to process numerous problems around CGCs. We think it is interesting to combine a two-fold approach combining contents analysis and lexical analysis. The lexical (rather quantitative) analysis makes it possible to measure very objective phenomena, such as the frequency of a brand for example, on a large scale. From a random extraction of several hundred CGCs, the contents

analysis (rather a qualitative one) allows encoding contents that are subtler to grasp, such as intentions, attitudes or emotions. The new variables constructed from these two techniques can, besides, be linked within the same analysis (as for section 3.4 of our article).

Managerial contributions

In this research, we decided to consider posts to Santa as an atypical form of Consumer Generated Content. These posts resemble CGCs, because they are placed on a site, they mention brands, and express a request by the brand user through an intercession character: Santa. On the other hand, posts do not express any opinion on the brand nor comment on its merits or possible defects. Posts emerge as an original indicator, which consists – more than recommending a brand – in desiring it, then in asking for it in writing for one’s own usage. Brand quotations in posts to Santa come out as a notability and popularity indicator with children. Being mentioned in letters to Santa would almost boil down to a kind of quality-label “*validated by the children, one of the most requested brands in posts to Santa*”.

The French market of children brands at Christmas is rather stable and concentrates on a few top leading global brands like *Playmobil*, *Barbie* or *Lego*. At least one of the 10 leading brands is mentioned in half of the Christmas wish lists. Brands confirm they are very clearly gendered and associated to children’s age. Between 7 and 9 years of age seems to be the peak time for brand desire.

Limitations

The main limitation of our research is related to the absence of a group of parents (and children) who are “against Christmas” and consequently do not take part in the season’s rituals – such as the letter to Santa – as an act of resistance against the consumer society.

The possible co-production of the letter is another research challenge. Some of the posts are obviously written by the parents, some by the children, some are written together with or under parents' supervision, but it is not always easy to guess. That means we do not exactly know who is speaking and then, it's not possible to make a clear distinction between the children's desires and the parents'. Especially, we cannot easily distinguish between the very spontaneously free children's letters and the co-produced ones, on which "parental filter or control" has possibly been applied.

Finally, ethical aspects must be taken into consideration, especially when children are involved. Our article is only an academic research effort and those user contents are not meant to be used for marketing or commercial purposes.

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