

Innovation in Product Promotions: A Case of Intended Use of Characters in the Chinese Market

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Abstract

Four categories of endorsers often used in advertising i.e. celebrities, employees, customer and spokes – characters (Stafford 2002). Not all over the world but also in China, spokes – characters have long been used and considered as a star of their commercials (Bell, 1992). Most of the literature in past focused only on recognition (e.g., Callcott and Phillips, 1996; Garretson and Niedrich 2004) and comparisons of the created spokes characters with human spokes – person (e.g. Heiser, Sierra and Torres 2008) and failed to combine created spokes – character credibility with attitude and behavior. This study tries to fill this gap, by investigating the impact of created spokes – character credibility (trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise) on attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards brand and purchase intention by conducting an experiment. Questionnaires were administered on a sample of 300 respondents. Correlation analysis was significant, and after that multiple regressions was used to test the impact on attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards brand and purchase intention. Implications of advertising strategy, limitations of this research and future research were discussed.

Key words: *Created spokes – characters, Credibility, Attitude towards Brand, Attitude towards Advertisement and Purchase Intention.*

1. Introduction:

In advertising, endorsers are often of four categories, namely celebrities, employees, spokes – characters and customers (Stafford 2002; Stout and Moon 1990). In academic literature, endorser credibility has admitted substantial attention (Bergin 1962; Sternthal Phillips and Dholakia 1978; Harmon and Coney 1982; Goldberg and Hartwick 1990). Experts recommend that the animated spoke – characters are very effective endorsers for advertisement (Stewart and Furse 1986) and considered as a star of their commercials (Bell 1992).

By definition, created animated spokes – character defined as “an animated being or animated object that is used to promote a product, service, or idea” (Phillips 1996) and does not have legal trademark but must be used consistently in conjunction with a product over time (Callcott and Lee 1995). Created spokes – characters used to create unique brand or company images (Callcott and Alvey 1991; Baldwin 1982; Mowen 1980; Rossiter and Percy 1987; Stewart and Furse 1986), to stand for the brand – and, in some instances, even becomes the brand (Callcott and Alvey 1991), to gain and hold consumer attention (Callcott and Alvey 1991; Baldwin 1982), to stand out of clutter (Dotz and Husain 2003; Callcott and Lee 1995), superior ability to make believable and acceptable claims, and to possibly affect purchase intention (Garretson and Nierich 2004; Callcott and Phillips 1996; Walker and Dubitsky 1994).

Most of the literature in past focused only on recognition (e.g., Callcott and Phillips 1996; Garretson and Niedrich 2004) and comparisons of the created spokes characters with human spokes – person (e.g. Heiser, Sierra and Torres 2008; Waldt, Loggerenberg & Wehmeyer 2009) and failed to combine created spokes – character credibility with attitude and behavior. This study tries to fill this gap, by investigating the impact of created spokes – character credibility (trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise) on attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards brand and purchase intention.

2. Review of Literature and Hypotheses

2.1 Source Credibility:

Source credibility research provides the understanding of which created spokes – characters can be more or less effective. By definition, source credibility defined as, “a communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (Ohanian, 1990 p. 41). Hovland, Janis and Keller (1953) popularized the term “source credibility” by concluding that perceived expertise and trustworthiness were inherent in the concept of source credibility, where expertise defined as “an individual’s superior ability to solve problems in a given area” and

trustworthiness was defined as “the degree of confidence that respondent has in the communicator’s intentions and ability to make valid assertion” (Hovland *et.al.* 1953). In addition to this, McGuire (1985) has defined source attractiveness in “Source Valence” model which refers to the perceived attractiveness of the source (Kahle and Homer 1985; Ohanian 1991; Kamins 1990). In fact, Ohanian (1990) adapted two components from this “Source credibility model” and one component from “Source Valence model” and developed tri-component scale to measure source credibility i.e. Source expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.

In the advertising literature as well, endorser perceived credibility has received considerable attention (Friedman and Friedman 1979; Atkin and Block 1983; Ohanian 1990, 1991; Goldsmith, Lafferty, and Newell 2000). Some studies concluded that trustworthiness is the most important dimension of credibility of source (Hovland and Weiss 1951 – 52; Friedman and Friedman, 1979; McGinnis and Ward 1980; Atkin and Block 1983; Kamins *et al.* 1989). Other studies emphasized on expertise (Maddux and Rogers 1980; Ohanian 1991; Chawla, Dave and Barr 1994; Wilson and Sherrell 1993) and some other studies supported attractiveness (Baker and Churchill 1977; Chaiken 1979; Patzer 1983; Kahle and Homer 1985; Caballero *et al.* 1989; Silvera and Austad 2004). In this research, authors had used the scale developed by Ohanian (1990) by using all three dimensions.

Abundant studies support that perceived source (i.e., spokesperson) credibility influences attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g. Miller and Baseheart 1969; Warren 1969; Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt 1978; Harmon and Coney 1982; Wu and Shaffer 1987; Moore Hausknecht and Thamodaran 1988). In addition, it was also founded that endorser credibility as an important antecedent to an individual’s attitude towards an advertisement and advertising effectiveness (Sternthal, Dholakia and Leavitt 1978; Lutz *et al.* 1983; Ohanian 1990; Lafferty *et al.* 2002).

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) provided Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and founded that endorser serves as a cue during peripheral processing. Peripheral processing in turn is associated with consumer's attitude toward the ad. In other words, if consumers perceive the endorser to be credible, they will have a more positive attitude toward the ad. In the same line, the study by Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999) showed that endorser credibility have an influential effect on attitude towards ad, in the context of Attitude towards Ad → Attitude towards brand → Purchase Intention. Therefore, it is hypothesized that

H1: Created spokes - character credibility has significant and positive influence over his / her attitude towards advertisement

Many research shows that endorsers source credibility leads to react positive towards brand (eg, Woodside and Davenport 1974; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Craig and McCann 1978; Mitchell and Olson 1981; Atkin and Block 1983; Goldberg and Hartwick 1990). Further, according to Elaboration likelihood Model (ELM), when consumer are more motivated to centrally process an ad, the brand relevant aspects increase and the peripheral cues decrease (Petty and Cacioppo, 1983). The direct relationship of corporate credibility and attitude towards brand was confirmed in the studies (Lafferty and Goldsmith 1999; Goldsmith *et al.* 2000). Therefore, it is hypothesized that

H2: Created spokes - character credibility has significant and positive influence over his / her attitude towards brand
Admittedly, it was demonstrated across multiple studies that likeable spokes – characters in advertisement have the ability to increase the likelihood of purchase intention (Urde 1994; Callcott and Phillips 1996; Callcott and Alvey 1991; Stewart and Furse 1986). In addition to this, Guido and Peluso (2009) investigated that animated spokes - character stimulate purchase intention only when the advertised product is matched to the attractiveness sub-dimension of perceived credibility. Newell (1993) and Davis (1994) founded positive effect of corporate credibility on attitude towards advertisement, attitude towards brand and purchase intention. This empirical evidence is consistent with studies of Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999) and Goldsmith *et. al.* (2000) showed direct relation between credibility and purchase intention. Thus,

H3: Created spokes - character credibility has significant and positive influence over his/her intention to purchase

2.2 Attitude towards advertisement:

In the context of advertising industry, Bauer and Greyser (1968) viewed on attitude towards advertising as a “predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure situation” (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). Many studies founded the direct relationship between attitude towards ad and purchase intention (MacKenzie *et. al.* 1986; Cox and Locander 1987; Biehal *et al.* 1992). In addition to this, Homer (1990) and Phelps and Hoy (1996) found out that attitude towards advertisement had significant effect on purchase intention. Thus, it is hypothesized that

H4: Consumer’s attitude towards advertisement has significant and positive influence over his/her intention to purchase

2.3 Attitude towards brand:

Kirmani and Zeithaml (1993) conceptualized brand attitude as “a more complex construct than perceived quality” and defined perceived quality as “the consumer’s judgment about a product’s overall excellence or superiority”. Aaker (1991) suggested that brand image is equivalent to brand associations and further Keller (1993) founded that brand associations are the attributes, benefits, and attitudes perceived by consumer concerning the brand.

When familiar and unfamiliar brands were tested, many studies found positive effect of attitude towards brand and purchase intention (e.g., Shimp & Gresham. 1985; Homer 1990; Brown & Stayman 1992; Homer & Yoon 1992; Phelps & Hoy 1996). In addition, many studies found that attitude towards brand have positive and significant effect on purchase intention (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Shimp & Gresham 1985; Batra & Ray 1986; Phelps & Hoy 1996). Thus,

H5: Consumer’s attitude toward brand has significant and positive influence over his/her intention to purchase the advertised product.

2.4 Purchase Intention:

Bagozzi, *et. al.* (1979); Ostrom, (1969) and Spears and Singh (2004) concisely defined purchase intentions as “an individual’s conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand”. Admittedly, it was demonstrated across multiple studies that likeable spokes – characters in advertisement have the ability to increase the likelihood of purchase intention (Urde 1994; Callcott and Phillips 1996; Callcott and Alvey 1991; Stewart and Furse 1986). Another study result showed that product package printed with an animated created spokes-character will draw more attention and resulted that it affects the purchase behavior too (Ulger, 2009).

Studies found that positive endorser credibility develop a positive attitude towards ad which leads to build attitude towards the brand which will lead to greater willingness to build a positive purchase intention (Shimp & Gresham 1985; Mackenzie, Lutz & Belch 1986; Brown and Stayman 1992; Deogun and Beatty 1998; Yoon *et al.* 1998; Lafferty and Goldsmith 1999).

Subsequent research (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989; Homer 1990; Brown and Stayman 1992) found strong support for the “attitudes toward the ads -> attitudes toward the brand -> purchase intention” relationships. Furthermore, Craciun and Madden (2002) took a look into how attitudes toward the ads influences brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand study assume to have effect on consumer’s purchase intention (e.g. Shimp & Gresham 1985; Goldsmith *et al.* 2000; Shimp 2000). Thus, it is hypothesized as,

H6: Consumer’s attitude towards advertisement and Consumer’s attitude toward brand has significant and positive influence over his/her intention to purchase the advertised product.

3. Methodology

3.1 The study

The present study was focused at exploring the impact of created spokes – character’s credibility on attitude towards advertisement, attitude towards brand and purchase intention. This study tries to fill up the gap in the domain of consumer psychology to combine created spokes – character credibility with attitude and behavior. The survey approach was used to collect data. A pre-experimental design was used to analyse the data obtained through survey.

3.2 The sample

The data reported in this paper were collected as part of large study designed to analyze created spokes – character’s credibility and its impact on attitudes and behavior. To determine the sample size, researcher has taken 95% level of confidence at 5 per cent tolerance error as population was unknown. With this, it was found that required sample size was about 270, while the actual number of respondent was 300. Sample drawn was a convenience sample that is on purely opportunistic basis from a readily accessible subgroup of population (Baker, 1990). For this study, 300 respondents were participated to provide feedback on ad exposed to them. A structured non-disguised questionnaire was designed to gather the data required for this research.

3.3 Procedure and study design

The experiment was took place by exposing participants to the snaps of popular television advertisement of soft drink aerated brands Fanta. The food and beverage was the top sector of TV advertising during 2011 that witnessed a growth of 10 per cent as compared to 2010. Among this, the soft drink aerated category is ranked first with 18

percent share in television advertising expenditure among the categories of food and beverages sector. This ad was popular among the viewers and contains fictitious spoke characters as a source. This ad contains fictitious human created spokes - character called Fanta Girl. Under pre experimental design, the One Shot Case Study (X O1) method has been used. Only those participants who had viewed this television commercial are considered for the survey.

3.4 Measures of the study

The source credibility scale was adapted from Ohanian (1990) scale aimed at capturing measure celebrity endorsers' perceived credibility that includes trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. Each of these sub dimensions has descriptive pairs and measured with five-item each. The descriptive pairs that measure Trustworthiness are: dependable–undependable, dishonest–honest, unreliable–reliable, insincere– sincere, and trustworthy–untrustworthy. The descriptive pairs for measuring expertise include: an expert–not an expert, inexperienced– experienced, unknowledgeable–knowledgeable, qualified–unqualified and unskilled–skilled. The following descriptive pairs measure attractiveness: unattractive–attractive, classy– not classy, ugly–beautiful, sexy–not sexy and plain - elegant.

To measure attitude towards ad a four-item scale, was measured on seven points semantic differential scale. Anchors used in this scale were: “good-bad, like very much-dislike very much, pleasant-unpleasant, and high quality-low quality” (Mitchel and Olson, 1981). Following this measure, the subjects were asked to rate their overall impression of the brand on seven point semantic differential scale anchored by “good-bad, likeable-not likeable, irritating-not irritating, and interesting-not interesting” (Mitchel and Olson, 1981). Next, subjects were asked how likely it would be that they would consider buying that aerated soft drink. It was measured by four seven point semantic differential scale, "very likely/very unlikely," "very probable/very improbable," "very possible/very impossible," and "very existent/very non-existent (Tripp *et. al.* 1994).

4. Data analysis

4.1 Demographic profile of respondents

The sample has a gender distribution of approximately 58.3 per cent female (n = 175) and 41.7 per cent male (n = 125). The age distribution of sample respondents is heavily dominated by age group 13-24 as its weight is 48.7 per cent (n = 146) in comparison with age group of respondent between 36 to 44 years who represent 26.0 per cent (n =78) and respondent in age of 25 to 35 years and above 45 years are 17.3 per cent (n=52) and 8.0 per cent (n=24) respectively. The education level of respondents is 33.7 per cent are graduates (n=101) and 31.0 per cent are post graduates (n=93). Occupation is constituted by the students who represent 48.3 per cent (n=145) of the sample, salaried with 21.7 per cent (n=65), with professional 14.0 per cent (n=42), housewives with 8.0 per cent (n=24), businessman with 6.3 per cent (n=19) and retired with 5.0 per cent (n=5) of the sample.

4.2 Reliability analysis

Prior to examining the relationship between variables under study, the strength of the scale was assessed by examining its reliability. The instrument was then subjected to the computation of coefficient alpha (Cronbach 1951). Cronbach's alpha was computed to ascertain the extent to which items making up each variable shared a common core. In reliability analysis, the alpha (α) coefficient was calculated to find out the internal consistency of the items on the scale. It was that in all cases found more than 0.6 (Nunnally 1978) (Table 1) which confirms that the scale shows good internal reliability.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics of constructs

Variable	Number of Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Source Credibility	15	0.783
Attractiveness	5	0.704
Trustworthiness	5	0.611
Expertise	5	0.715
Attitude towards the ad	4	0.602
Brand attitude	4	0.741
Purchase Intention	4	0.709

For subsequent analysis according to study objectives, attitude towards an advertisement, attitude towards brand and purchase intention were treated as separate criterion variables in first three multiple regression models. In other three multiple regression models, purchase intention were treated as a separate criterion. The independent variables included for first three were created spokes - character credibility and in other three attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand. Before finding the relationship, correlation among dependent variable and independent variables must be under scrutiny.

Table 2 Correlations matrix

Correlation	Classification			
	Created spokes – character's credibility	Attitude towards ad	Attitude towards brand	Purchase Intention
Created spokes – character's credibility	1.0			
Attitude towards ad	0.485*	1.0		
Attitude towards brand	0.441*	0.467*	1.0	
Purchase Intention	0.458*	0.380*	0.360*	1.0

Note: * $p < 0.01$

The results of the preliminary analysis of correlations indicated that the created spokes - character credibility were significantly correlated with attitude towards ad, attitude towards brand and purchase intention and also attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand are significantly correlated with purchase intention as shown in table 2.

Linear regression analysis provides the standardized (β) and unstandardized (B) regression coefficients with their respective contribution and predictive power of each variable. In this study, Enter method was used.

Table 3 Linear regression analysis on Attitude towards Ad

Variables	Attitude towards Ad			
	B ^a	β^b	Sig. (p-value)	VIF statistics
Created spokes – character credibility	0.485	0.506	0.000	1.000
R ²	0.235			
Adjusted R ²	0.233			
F	91.74*			

Note: a Standardised coefficients, b Unstandardised coefficients. * $p < 0.01$.

To understand the contribution of created spokes – character credibility in attitude towards ad, a regression analysis was conducted. The VIF value of the regression model is 1.000, which was below 10, so there was no “collinearity” in this regression model (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Created spokes – character credibility explained 23.5 per cent of the

variance in attitude towards ad ($R^2 = 0.235$, $F(1, 298) = 91.74$, $p < 0.01$) and was found to positively and significantly associated with attitude towards ad as $\beta = 0.506$ (sig. = 0.000; $t = 9.578$). This indicates that alternate hypotheses (H1) is accepted.

Table 4 Linear regression analysis on Attitude towards brand

Variables	Attitude towards Brand			
	B ^a	β^b	Sig. (p-value)	VIF statistics
Created spokes – character credibility	0.441	0.553	0.000	1.000
R^2	0.194			
Adjusted R^2	0.192			
F	71.92*			

Note: a Standardised coefficients, b Unstandardised coefficients. * $p < 0.01$.

To understand the contribution of created spokes – character credibility in attitude towards brand, a regression analysis was conducted. The VIF value of the regression model is 1.000, which was below 10, so there was no “collinearity” in this regression model (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Created spokes – character credibility explained 19.4 per cent of the variance in attitude towards ad ($R^2 = 0.194$, $F(1, 298) = 71.92$, $p < 0.01$) and was found to positively and significantly associated with attitude towards brand as $\beta = 0.553$ (sig. = 0.000; $t = 8.481$). This indicates that alternate hypotheses (H2) is accepted.

Table 5 Linear regression analysis on Purchase Intention

Variables	Purchase Intention			
	B ^a	β^b	Sig. (p-value)	VIF statistics
Created spokes – character credibility	0.458	0.644	0.000	1.000
R^2	0.210			
Adjusted R^2	0.207			
F	79.05*			

Note: a Standardised coefficients, b Unstandardised coefficients. * $p < 0.01$.

To understand the contribution of created spokes – character credibility in purchase intention, a regression analysis was conducted. The VIF value of the regression model is 1.000, which was below 10, so there was no “collinearity” in this regression model (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Created spokes – character credibility explained 21.0 per cent of the variance in attitude towards ad ($R^2 = 0.210$, $F(1, 298) = 79.05$, $p < 0.01$) and was found to positively and significantly associated with attitude towards brand as $\beta = 0.644$ (sig. = 0.000; $t = 8.891$). This indicates that alternate hypotheses (H3) is accepted.

Result of table 6, understand the contribution of attitude towards ad in purchase intention, a regression analysis was conducted. Attitude towards ad explained 14.4 per cent of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.144$, $F(1, 298) = 50.20$, $p < 0.01$) and was found to positively and significantly associated with purchase intention as $\beta = 0.512$ (sig. = 0.000; $t = 7.085$). This indicates that alternate hypotheses (H4) is accepted.

Further, to understand the contribution of attitude towards brand in purchase intention regression analysis showed that attitude towards brand explained 13.0 per cent of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.130$, $F(1, 298) = 44.35$, $p < 0.01$) and was found to positively and significantly associated with purchase intention as $\beta = 0.404$ (sig. = 0.000; $t = 6.659$). This indicates that alternate hypotheses (H5) is accepted.

Table 6 Linear and Multiple regression analysis on Purchase Intention

Variables	Purchase Intention		Purchase Intention			
	β^b	β^b	B ^a	β^b	Sig. (p-value)	VIF Statistics
Attitude towards ad	0.512	---	0.271	0.365	0.000	1.279
Attitude towards brand	---	0.404	0.233	0.262	0.000	1.279
B ^a	0.380	0.360				
Sig. (p-value)	0.000	0.000				
VIF statistics	1.000	1.000				
R ²	0.144	0.130			0.187	
Adjusted R ²	0.141	0.127			0.181	
F	50.20*	44.35*			34.11*	

Note: a Standardised coefficients, b Unstandardised coefficients. * $p < 0.01$.

To further understand the impact of both attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand in purchase intention, regression analysis in table 6 showed that, model was significant, $R^2 = 0.187$, $F(2, 297) = 34.11$, $p < 0.01$. The overall results support alternate hypotheses (H6) as attitude towards ad had statistically significant contribution in explaining variations in purchase intention (sig. = 0.000; $t = 4.573$; $\beta = 0.365$) and attitude towards brand had statistically significant contribution in explaining variations in purchase intention (sig. = 0.000; $t = 3.946$; $\beta = 0.262$). Attitude towards ad explains higher variation in comparison to attitude towards brand.

5. Discussion

The study tried to examine the impact of created spokes – character credibility on attitude towards ad, attitude towards brand and purchase intention. In addition, it also attempted to find out the role of attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand as a mediator in the relationship between created spokes – character credibility and purchase intention.

The present study found that created spokes – character credibility had significant and positive impact on attitude towards ad (H1), attitude towards brand (H2) and purchase intention (H3), which supported study results carried out by Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999), Goldsmith *et. al.* (2000) and Lafferty *et.al.* (2002). Furthermore, study also found that attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand both simultaneously played a role mediator in the relationship between created spokes – character credibility and purchase intention (H6) as compare to attitude towards ad as a alone mediator between credibility and purchase intention (H4) and attitude towards brand as a alone mediator for the same (H5). In addition to this, attitude towards ad explains higher variation in comparison to attitude towards brand in purchase intention. In the line of this finding, some study found that credibility influences attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g. Miller and Baseheart 1969; Warren 1969; Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt 1978; Harmon and Coney 1982; Wu and Shaffer 1987; Moore, Hausknecht and Thamodaran 1988) and attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand assume to have effect on consumer's purchase intention (e.g. Shimp & Gresham 1985; Goldsmith *et al.* 2000).

Companies should take positive steps to preserve and enhance created spokes - character credibility, i.e. their attractiveness and expertise, because of the impact these perceptions have on consumer response to ads and brands and ultimately lead to purchase intention. The managerial implications for advertising industry administrators to draft various strategies are: make sure that if created spokes – character is used in the advertisement as an endorser; than it should be attractive and enjoy expertise – variables of source credibility, which will be helpful to lead higher created spokes – character credibility and it will develop positive attitude towards ad and attitude towards brand simultaneously lead to positive purchase intention. In addition, keep the advertisement message informative so as consumers can be persuaded in order to find the best fit in pairing a created spokes - character and brand specifically its product attributes. In summary, advertiser can use the created spokes character to develop strong and positive attitude and behavioral intention.

6. Limitations and future research

There are three limitations to this study. First, during the data gathering process the stimuli materials were kept in the same order. So, there may be ordering effect in the opinion of the respondents. Second, an external factor, namely perceived brand image, was not taken into consideration. Third, Ohanian's (1990) scale which was used for data collection was originally developed to measure the credibility of celebrity endorsers and not created endorsers.

This research finds that impact of the variables by regression analysis future research can confirm the validity by structural analysis which "provides researcher with the opportunity to test model using a single comprehensive method that examines multiple relationship simultaneously" (Lafferty *et. al.*, 2002; p 8). This research is limited towards fictitious human created animated spokes – characters (actor) only, but the further research can be carried on by comparison like fictitious humans v/s non-human created spokes – character.

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