

# The Research on the Effect of Non-Brand Relevance of Spokescharacters to Gen Z with Regulation of Conformity

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**ABSTRACT.** In the contemporary society, the spokescharacters have played a significant role in the market. Especially brand collaboration, collaborating with famous virtual characters, become more acceptable for the business. However, this kind collaboration tends to ignore and eliminate the relevance of the spokescharacters and the image of the brand. As result, this research explored that the reduce of relevance would affect the purchase intention of Gen Z, the largest fan group of virtual characters, and whether the Conformity would reduce this influence. The result demonstrated that, the relevance of spokescharacters is not a factor that would influence purchase intention among the Gen Z, even if they are not fans of the virtual characters. However, the influence of Conformity is still significant.

## 1.Introduction

According to the iResearch, Chinese Secondary Dimension Industry Report, it reported that the number of individuals who loves the culture of the Secondary dimension, including animation, comics, and video games, has increased to 400 million in 2020, and this number will pass to 500 million in 2023. In addition, the Gen Z is the main force of this population, accounted for over 80 percent. Due to the increased purchasing power of the Gen Z, the investment in virtual characters has risen steadily, which means the industry of the secondary dimension stepped into maturity period[1].

With the development of the computer graphics, the technic of the virtual characters has been improved significantly. Many virtual characters have become very popular on the Internet, like Luo Tianyi and Hatsune Miku, and have gained numerous fans in Gen Z. in the previous research, the virtual characters including anthropomorphic animals or anthropomorphic trademark can produce a influence that resemble the real person endorser.[2] Nowadays, increasing number of brands, including food industry, cosmetic industry and clothing industry, tend to collaborate with these popular and successful virtual character as their spokesperson, not only because the cost of using a virtual endorser is relevant low, compared with the celebrity, but also because the number of reports on celebrities' scandals has increased due to widespread of the Internet. Additionally, two successful brands cooperate together can attract two groups of fans to purchase the products.

Using the virtual image as the brand endorsers has a long history, for instance, Chicky is the exclusive brand virtual endorser of KFC in Chinese market during 1990s to 2000s. The previous study suggests, the Spokescharacters have higher flexibility, which can prevent the negative connection between brand and celebrity's scandals[3], and when the brand has enmeshed in negative information, the spokescharacter who is not related with the information can defense the brand[4].

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However, an exclusive virtual endorser requires a lot of time cost and funding to build the image and connection with brand [5]. As a result, collaboration with ready and successful virtual characters seems more cost friendly and acceptable generally by nowadays brands. Nevertheless, the virtual character that brand collaborated with tend to decrease the relevancy with brand image. In October 2017, KFC collaborated with Luo Tianyi in Chinese market, which has little connection between these two images, although it brought many purchases of the fans.



**Figure 1:** the Advertisement of KFC collaborated with Luo Tianyi

As a result, the first aim of this study is to explore that the low relevancy whether effect the purchase intension of Gen Z who are not fans of this virtual character. The previous research into the relevance of the spokescharacters has mostly focused on those exclusive ones but has ignored that the change of the spokescharacters, from the brand-exclusive one to the brand-collaboration. The second aim of this study is to research whether phenomenon that the marketing of brand-collaboration will trigger a bulk purchase of fans will provoke the conformity of the customers who are not the fans of the spokescharacters.

Therefore, this research will cover this gap and provide a reference to businesses when they are choosing the spokescharacters to collaborate.

## 2. Conceptual Overview

Over the past three decades, there have been a lot of research about the interactive influence among spokescharacter's traits, brand and consumers behaviors, which has advanced the knowledge about the effect of the choice of spokescharacters. And the spokescharacter's traits can refine into Likability, Nostalgic and Relevance. Previous study suggests that the characters with likability can facilitate the purchase intention of consumers and can also increase the brand familiar[6][7]; and the classic and nostalgic characters can improve the consumer's brand trust[7]. And the relevancy is also a significant topic in the research of spokescharacter. According to the previous research, both more and less relevant information can increase learning. Because it is more easily for people to process and integrate information, the high relevant information can be memorized[8]. However, the less relevant information will improve individual's memory, because that will trigger people's curiosity to process the information[9]. As a result, in 2005, Garretson and Burton use elaboration likelihood model (ELM) [10] to explain these two contrary views. They believe that the brand processors who are motivated to process the details of brand will be more sensitive to the relevancy of brand information than ad processors are. And the experiment suggests that the spokescharacter with high brand relevancy can increase the brand awareness and brand attitude [11].

Conformity behavior is a very universal social phenomenon, which is from the impact of crowd to individual. And Conformity can be divided into three parts, compliance, identification and internalization[12]. And the internalization has the greatest impact on the individual. When the collaboration between popular virtual character and brand arises the purchase behavior of the character's fans, this phenomenon will consciously or unconsciously influence the consumer of Gen Z, who are not even fans of this virtual characters.

In summary, the relevancy between the spokescharacters and brand image will influence the regular consumer's attitude towards the brand awareness. However, with the regulation of conformity, this influence will be weakened. Therefore, two hypotheses can be offered:

H1: The high relevancy between Spokescharacters and brand image will increase the Gen Z attitude to the brand, which will increase the desire to purchase.

H2: the consumer with high level of Conformity will weaken the impact of this relevancy.

According to the hypotheses, the model of this experiments was provided below.

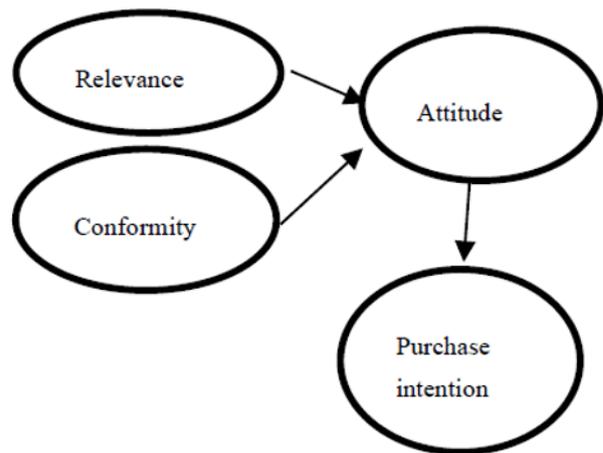


Figure 2: Research Model

## 3. Experiment

In order to test whether relevancy between spokescharacters and brand image would influence the Gen Z's attitude to brand, when they are not fun of the spokescharacters (H1), so, the stimulus of the experiment is the images of the spokescharacters which does not exist on the market. Additionally, to avoid other characteristic, like age, gender, likability and race, from impacting the judgement of subjects, the image of both spokescharacters were anthropomorphic fruit and vegetable (watermelon and pumpkin). Furthermore, to eliminate the influence of staring of spokescharacters[13], both images were looking straight ahead with the same post. Meanwhile, to exclude the influence of the brand, this experiment used the self-designed non-existent brand, a local fruit store. At last, the final advertisement poster, both spokescharacters and brand name were in the same place: the spokecharacters were in the center of the posters, and the brand name "Gary Fruit Store" were on the right. In the control group, the spokescharacter was anthropomorphic watermelon, and in the experimental group, the spokescharacter was anthropomorphic pumpkin.

The two posters used in the experiment were provided below.



Figure 3: Poster with Higher Relevant Spokecharacters



**Figure 4:** Poster with Lower Relevant Spokecharacter

Before the experiment, to measures of the spokecharacters's relevancy to the brand image, there was a pretest (n=125) including two questions: "The idea of the [picture] pictured with [brand image] represents a very good fit", and "I think that the picture of the [character] is relevant for [product]."[11]. The coefficient alpha was 0.993 for the product, and the differences in the check means were significant, which were support of the relevancy manipulation.

This experiment adapted the Double Factor Experimental Design (Conformity and Relevance of spokescharacter). The measurement of conformity was using previous scale to obtain a continuous variable, and the relevance of spokescharaters was manipulating the posters. The results were collected through anonymous questionnaire survey distributed on the Internet. There were 125 adult Gen Z recruited to participate the experiment. (Male: 67, Female: 58)

Before the experiment, every participant was required to finish a scale of conformity, which included three questions: 1) when the brand launched a limited product, will increase my purchasing craving? 2) I will ask for others' advice when I am shopping. 3) To avoid out of step with the times, I will follow the crowd to purchase.

Afterward, participants will be divided randomly into two groups and watch the advertisement posters. After that, they were required to answer the questions that test their attitude and behavior intension, with seven-point Likert scale. And the questions include 1) the impression of the fruit store; 2) the confidence of quality of the products; 3) the probability that I will introduce this store to others.

#### 4.Results

In this experiment, the lower score that participants got in scale of conformity, the less probability they would be affected by the others when they processed a purchase ( $\alpha = 0.732$ ,  $M=4.427$ ,  $SD=2.968$ ). And then, the average score of the three questions asked for the attitudes of brand and behavior intension was reflected of the willingness of purchase ( $\alpha=0.955$ ,  $M=3.738$ ,  $SD=3.338$ ).

And the data of this experiment were analyzed by the SPSS: (1) the relevance of spokescharacters (0=high relevance, 1=low relevance); (2) the influence of Conformity; (3) two-way interaction between the relevance of spokescharacters and the Conformity. The independent variable is the relevance of spokescharacters, and the depend variable is willingness of purchase, and the Conformity is moderator variable.

The experiment result demonstrated that the relevance of the spokescharacters was non-significant ( $F=1.305$ ,  $p = 0.256$ ), the influence of Conformity was significant, ( $F=2.185$ ,  $p=0.009$ ). And the relevance of the spokescharacters and the Conformity failed to reach the level of significant ( $F=0.736$ ,  $p=0.742$ ).

Based the result of experiment, nowadays, the relevance of the spokescharacters is less important as a factor of increasing the consumers' willingness to purchase. Nevertheless, the Conformity still plays a vital role in attracting consumers.

**Table 1.** effects of Relevance and Conformity

Sources of Variation	F Value	P Value	Eta <sup>2</sup>
Relevance (R)	1.305	.256	.014
Conformity (C)	2.185	.009	.290
Two-Way Interactions			
R×C	.736	.742	.108

#### 5.Conclusion

In the contemporary market, the spokescharacters can bring the new opportunities to the brand and can attract younger customers. The way of spokescharacters for product endorsement is different with the previous ones. The spokescharacters are no longer exclusive to one certain brand, instead, they can endorse many brands in a certain time. To the brand, they can also cooperate with many successful spokescharacters to attract customers.

Although, the previous research showed that more relevant spokescharacters tend to help improve the willingness to purchase, nowadays, as the Gen Z are becoming the main force of the source of purchasing power, this factor can be eliminated. When businesses are making decision of choosing the spokescharacters, they can concentrate more on the popularity of the spokescharacters. Additionally, the influence of the Conformity is still a significant factor, in that when the fans of a famous visual character or idol purchase the products that advertised by them, their friends will be impacted to purchase also. As a result, it is important for the business to create and rise the Web-traffic of the advertisement of the brand collaboration.

This paper fills the gaps of the research of the spokescharacters in a certain extent, but there are still limitations existing. There are million types of spokescharacters, including genders, ages, and races, even their emotions and figures can be considered in future research. Additionally, the posters that the experiment used is static, which failed to consider that interaction of

spokescharacters with audiences in videos or game will create different results.

On the other hand, different kinds of product may have different consequences. The experiment of this paper only considered the mass-market product, fruits. In the future research, the luxury brand can be considered.

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