Spokes-character Branding

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the persuasiveness of brands that use spokes-characters in their advertising through the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Spokes-characters, through their personality traits and physical characteristics, are able to persuade consumers into action. Spokes-characters can elicit brand loyalty and cause consumers to stay loyal to their brand from youth. The results come from surveys of a convenience sample of Spring Hill College students and professors. The results from this study show that spokes-characters are able to persuade consumers into action and elicit brand loyalty based on their personality traits, physical characteristics and advertisements aimed at children.

**Introduction**

Spokes-characters are an important branding tactic to maintain and control a brand image in a consumer’s mind. Branding is a marketing tool used by advertisers to persuade consumers and to elicit brand loyalty. “A brand is ownership of a piece of the mind of the consumer,” (Mullin, 2006, p. 38), and its goal is to stick in a consumer’s mind for instant recall. A consumer has a need and recalling the brand should present the solution. Animated characters that represent brands add “personality dimensions and source credibility dimensions, including expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness” (Kyung & Sung, 2011, p. 65).

In general, branding is a form of persuasion. Persuasion is “human communication that is designed to influence others by modifying their beliefs, values, or attitudes” (Dainton & Zelley, 2015, p. 118). The sender of the message or brand has a goal, and the receiver has to be motivated to accept that message. A persuasion theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), explains, “Targets of persuasive messages use mental processes of motivation and reasoning (or a lack thereof) to accept or reject persuasive messages,” (Dainton & Zelley, 2015, p. 119). This theory explains multiple routes to reach the minds of consumers, and, for the purposes of this research paper, will be reviewed through the lens of a peripheral route.

The purpose of this pilot study is to explore branding from the perspective of animated spokes-characters. It will be examined through the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model to determine answers to this research question: How does the use of spokes-characters affect the persuasiveness of advertising?

**Literature Review**

The purpose of a brand is to generate a recall into action process. This means that when a consumer has a need, a brand should, ideally, come to mind. “A brand is an intangible but critical component of what a company stands for,” (Mullin, 2006, p. 39). A brand acts as a promise to a consumer. Through a brand, a consumer can find “trust, consistency, and a defined set of expectations,” (Mullin, 2006, p. 39). Brands should be unique enough that they stand out among the millions of brands that fill magazine pages, TV commercials, and grocery store aisles. A brand is what sets a business apart from all the rest.

Much of the branding process involves emotion, rather than reason. Neurologist Donald Cane explains in *Lovemarks* “emotion leads to action while reason leads to conclusions,” (Roberts, 2004, p. 42). When a need arises and a consumer recalls a brand, it is his or her emotional connection to the brand that compels action. Maurice Levy further elaborates, “The vast majority of the population, however, consumes *and* shops with their mind and their heart, or if you prefer, their emotions,” (Roberts, 2004, p. 43). Consumers can ask themselves: what does the product do and why is it a superior choice? When it comes to taking action and making the purchase decision, consumers can decide: “I like it, I prefer it, I feel good about it,” (Roberts, 2004, p. 43).

Through studies done by John Cacioppo and Richard Petty (1979), it was found that “subjects would agree more with the pro- than with the counterattidunal advocacy, and repetition would lead to increasing, then decreasing with the advocacy,” (p. 100). This means when an advertisement has a positive message and is repeated, consumers are more likely to respond positively. This study led them to develop the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which explains how targets of messages in advertisements use mental processes to accept or reject the messages. Branding and spokes-character advertising use a peripheral route of persuasion. This means the emotions of the consumer are taken into account and the persuasion comes from a more superficial standpoint. Different tactics, such as authority and commitment, are needed from the brand in order to target the consumer’s emotions. The consumer needs to like the product before they will act in any way. A peripherally routed message tells the consumer that time is running out: act now; it poses a product next to its competitor and explains why it’s a better version; it shows the consumer what it can provide for them. It targets the consumer’s emotions and causes them to act.

Spokes-characters have been considered as “creative elements that promote brand differentiation,” (Folse, Netemeyer, & Burton, 2012, p. 17). Garretson and Burton (2005) define spokes-characters as “humanlike visual images that can symbolically convey a brand’s attributes, benefits, or personality” (p. 118). Another definition states that spokescharacters are “an animated being or animated object that is used to promote a product, service, or idea, (Phillips & Gyoerick, 2015, p. 714). Although it helps, these characters do not need to be legally trademarked, but they do need to be associated with the brand or product over time.

The original purpose of a spokes-character was solely “brand identification and differentiation,” (Phillips, 1996). Throughout time, the roles of spokes-characters have grown and developed into a way for consumers to develop relationships with specific brands. According to Phillips, originally, spokes-characters were classified by four categories: appearance, medium, origin and promotion. Categorization based on products and services then became an additional form. Other factors that are now taken into consideration include gender and ethnicity (Phillips & Gyoerick, 2015).

Burton et al. (2006) explain through their research that consumers benefit from their relationships with brands. Furthermore, “consumers actually seek relationships to simplify the decision-making process with reduced information search and cognitive dissonance,” (p. 18). Spokes-characters act as a link between consumers and a brand. It is much easier to connect with or form a relationship with a brand when there is a humanlike character. Pierce (2001) reported,

animated spokes-characters are both popular with audiences and effective in advertising because they may serve as objects of nostalgia, they can create an identity for the brand or advertiser, and they can serve as positive affect cues because people enjoy watching cartoons and associate positive feelings with them, which then leads to positive feelings for the product as well as a greater recall of the product, (p. 849).

One way that spokes-characters are able to affect the persuasiveness of advertising is through their personality traits, emotions and physical characteristics. A study completed by Folse et al. (2012) showed that “personified spokescharacter characteristics both directly and indirectly influence brand trust, brand attitude and willingness to pay a price premium,” (p. 23). Sincerity is defined as being honest and genuine while being exciting means having energy or being extroverted. Sincerity and excitement, positive characteristics of spokes-characters, increase levels of brand trust and attitude in a consumer (Folse et al., 2012). When a spokes-character demonstrates positive personality traits, consumers are more likely to favor and trust the brand in question. Pierce (2001) explains, “they can create a desirable image for the product by linking the personality and cultural meaning of the character to the product in the minds of the consumers,” (p. 849). In regards to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the peripherally routed messages come about with the personality traits and characteristics of the spokes-character. These characters possess traits that are appealing to consumers; they get the consumer to like and trust them through an emotional connection. Then, a consumer is more likely to act.

A second way that spokes-characters are able to affect the persuasiveness of advertising is through gender, both in regard to the character and the consumer. Pierce (2001) reported the findings of multiple studies on gender representation in advertisements. She reported that women are represented in advertisements for bathroom or kitchen products and men are represented in advertisements for nondomestic products. Men are used as voice-overs in commercials more than women. Women are shown in weaker or more passive positions when compared to men in commercials. In regard to animated spokes-characters, Pierce (2001) found that “changing the gender of a spokes-character changes the perceptions of the product,” (p. 855). Her findings show that men are less likely to cross gender lines in advertisements than women. For example, with a golf ball advertisement, a male ball spokes-character seems to be more appropriate, targeted and sincere than a female ball character. However, male spokes-characters are not always viewed as authoritative or persuasive depending on the situation or product. Together Pierce and McBride (2002) found that male characters tend to be more memorable than women characters because of the fact that more male characters are used. Because of this, they reported that male characters and voices are, in fact, more authoritative. This does not disprove Pierce’s previous research because in regard to some products, a male voice is not seen as authoritative. While the study completed by Pierce and McBride did not test the effects of gender on likability or memorability, it did enforce the idea that, in media advertisements, males are more important than females.

In regard to consumers, “A character’s appearance and perhaps its role can be said to depend on the gender of the target audience member and the type of product associated with the character in the ad,” (Phillips and Gyoerick, 1999, p. 721). Men and women perceive spokes-characters for specific products, which are not gender neutral, differently. Consumers connect the gender of the character to the gender of the product. “A typically male or female product was perceived as less the province of that gender with a spokes-character of the opposite sex or a neutral character,” (Pierce, 2001, p. 855).

Taking the Elaboration Likelihood Model into consideration, gender and the authority that comes with gender are where emotions come into action. If a female character is endorsing a cleaning product, there is more trust and honesty elicited than if a male character were endorsing the same cleaning product.

A third area where spokes-characters are able to affect the persuasiveness of advertising is through advertisements aimed at children. Connor (2006) reported “In studies of children as young as three years of age, exposure to television advertising was correlated positively with recall of, request for, and consumption of advertised food products,” (p. 1479). Children are able to recognize and remember a brand as early as age two (Connor, 2006). Marketers aim advertisements with brands at these young children to create brand awareness and loyalty. As the child grows, he or she will see the same brands and his or her loyalty should continue to grow. Though Connor’s study (2006), spokes-characters were often used in advertisements aimed at children and “seemed to be designed to build social or emotional associations with products or brands,” (2006, p. 1483).

Neely and Schumann (2004) found, “animated advertising may be particularly attractive and attention getting to preschool children because the obvious action, movement, and sound effects associated with animation embody perceptual salience,” (p. 9). Animated spokes-characters are an important aspect of advertisements aimed at children because they are visually attractive and evoke brand recognition (Neely & Schumann, 2006). They explain, “a child’s beliefs and desires about a product (or product entity) may be moderated by the child’s affective evaluation of the character,” (Neely & Schumann, 2006, p. 9). This is where the Elaboration Likelihood Model applies. When a child likes an animated spokes-character, they like the product because they are unable to really differentiate the two. One specific characteristic of child-aimed advertisements is when the spokes-character has eye contact with the child. In a study performed by Musicus, Tal and Wansink (2015), “participants viewing eye-contact cereal boxes reported feeling greater connection to the cereal,” thus creating liking towards the brand from the spokes-character (p. 724).

The secondary research above, which grew from this study’s research question, how does the use of spokes-characters affect the persuasiveness of advertising, leads to the following hypothesis: Through their personality traits, physical characteristics and advertisements aimed at children, spokes-characters persuade consumers into action and elicit brand loyalty.

**Methodology**

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore branding from the perspective of animated spokes-characters. It was examined through the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model to determine the answer to this research question: How does the use of spokes-characters affect the persuasiveness of advertising?

Scale and nominal questions were used in the survey. The purpose of this survey is to understand how respondents feel about and are affected by spokes-character branding. The questions are looking to answer whether consumers are persuaded to purchase products based on the spokes-character of a brand. There were questions asked that related to the theory, research questions and the hypothesis.

Questions 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16 and 17 relate to the theory. The peripheral route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model explains how consumers can be targeted peripherally, or without their cognitive knowledge, through advertisements. The emotions of the consumer are targeted through advertisements, or, more specifically, through spokes-character. The questions that relate to the theory are about brands with spokes-characters and their attractiveness or persuasiveness due to personality traits or physical characteristics. A consumer needs to like a product, or feel a connection to the brand, in order to act, or make the purchase.

Questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 18 relate to the research question. These questions are about loyalty towards brands with spokes-characters and which parts of the characters make them persuasive.

Question 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 18 relate to the hypothesis: Through their personality traits, physical characteristics and advertisements aimed at children, spokes-characters persuade consumers into action and elicit brand loyalty. Questions eight and nine ask directly about spokes-characters personality traits. Questions 12 and 13 ask directly about spokes-characters physical characteristics. Questions five, six and seven ask about advertisements aimed at children. Questions 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 pertain to consumers being persuaded into action. Question three, four, five and seven aim to learn if spokes-characters can elicit brand loyalty.

The sample selection was a convenience sample of Spring Hill College students and professors age 19 and older on campus. The researcher distributed surveys by hand and results were analyzed through SPSS. Frequency, descriptive, cross tab, Cronbach’s alpha and reliability analysis tests were used.

**Analysis**

The study surveyed 56 participants. Eighty percent of the sample were ages 19-21, 16% were 22-24 and 4% were 31+. Fifty-six percent of respondents were female and 44% were male. All eight academic departments of Spring Hill College were represented in this survey, but the leading groups were the Communication Arts department with 35% and the Business department with 21%. The sample selection for this research was a convenience sample, and the results cannot be applied to the population.

The frequency tests ran shows a variety of results. Forty-seven percent of respondents claim that they are loyal to brands, in general. Some brands reported by respondents include Apple, Nike, Kellogg, and various personal hygiene products. Seventy-one percent of participants agreed that the use of a spokes-character will facilitate the success of a product and 45% agree that they are attracted to brands with spokes-characters. When asked if a spokes-character can cause a consumer to favor a brand, 48% of participants responded neutral.

Forty-five percent of respondents strongly agree that they have remained loyal to brands since their youth. Some reported brands include Cheerios, Lucky Charms, Frosted Flakes and Coca-Cola. Thirty-five percent of respondents agreed that spokes-characters in advertisements affect children.

When questioned about a spokes-characters personality, 55% of participants agreed that a spokes-character needs to be sincere, and 55% of respondents agreed that a spokes-character needs to have energy. Thirty-three percent of respondents agree that a spokes-character can cause a consumer to like a product, but 50% of respondents were neutral when asked if a spokes-character can cause a consumer to trust a product. When questioned about spokes-characters physical characteristics, participants responded neutral about the character’s gender causing a consumer to like or trust a product.

Forty-one percent of participants agreed they make purchases from the heart, and 48% of participants agreed they make purchases from the brain. Forty-eight percent strongly agreed they buy a product because they like that product. Forty-four percent agreed they choose a product to purchase solely based on convenience.

The descriptive tests show that 14 of the 18 scale questions had a minimum response of one (strongly disagree), three questions had a minimum response of two (disagree) and one question had a minimum response of three (neutral). All 18 questions elicited the maximum response of five (strongly agree). The mean of the responses to the questions ranged from 2.89 to 4.52, which shows that respondents either mostly felt neutral or agreed with what the question was asking. Respondents answered twelve of the 18 questions consistently with standard deviations ranging from .501 to .999. The remaining six questions were answered more inconsistently, with standard deviations ranging form 1.003 to 1.119.

Cross tabs were run for a variety of purposes. The first set was run to determine the connection between a spokes-character’s personality and brand loyalty since youth. Respondent’s answers show that children are affected through ads and that a spokes-character can elicit liking and trust. Results show, .000, that a spokes-character can affect a child causing them to like the product and remain loyal to the brand as they grow. Another set of crosstabs was run to determine whether purchases are made based on a spokes-character or convenience. Results show, .000, that a spokes-character can cause a consumer to favor a brand and persuade them to make a purchase. When a consumer is attracted to a spokes-character, they are more likely to complete the purchase, .025. However, results show, .026, that consumers can be persuaded to buy a product with a spokes-character based on convenience. A third set of crosstabs was run to determine the effect a spokes-character’s gender has on the consumer. Results show, .000, that the spokes character’s gender can cause a consumer to both like and trust a product.

Cronbach’s Alphas were run to determine the relationships between the questions that relate specifically to the research question, theory or hypothesis. The questions asked to support the research question yielded a .736, proving that the questions asked did relate to one another. The questions asked to support the theory yielded a .686, showing that the questions did not work well together to support the theory. The questions asked to support the hypothesis yielded a .782, supporting the idea that the questions asked are related to one another. The research showed that respondents make purchases based on emotion, or from the heart. The surveys set out to discover if consumers make thought they made purchases from their heart or their brain. Respondents reported that they make purchases from both their heart and their brain, depending on the situation and product.

**Conclusion**

After the research and surveys were completed, it was obvious that the results confirm the hypothesis: Through their personality traits, physical characteristics and advertisements aimed at children, spokes-characters persuade consumers into action and elicit brand loyalty. Data analysis proved that spokes-characters could, in fact, persuade consumers into action through their personality traits, such as sincerity and energy, and physical characteristics, such as gender. Children are affected by advertisements and do remain loyal to brands, with or without spokes-characters, as they grow up.

From data analysis and results, researchers can conclude that spokes-characters can elicit brand loyalty and persuade consumers into action. The survey in the pilot study can be used with some minor modifications made to the questions related to the theory, in a full-scale research project related to this research question. With a more clear definition of a spokes-character (animated character rather than a spokesperson) given to those surveyed, more accurate results could have been obtained.

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**Appendices**

Appendix A- Survey

Appendix B- SPSS Output data