The Influence of Spokes-Characters on Consumer Patronage Intention

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Abstract

This study used structural equation modeling to examine the affective transfer of three attitudinal consumer constructs, which are the attitude toward spokes-characters, the attitude toward spokes-character theme stores, brand retailer attitude, and the influence of these attitudes on spokes-character theme and brand retailer patronage intention. The results showed that attitudes toward spokes-characters and brand retailers influenced consumer attitude toward spokes-character theme stores. Furthermore, consumers’ relative familiarity with the spokes-character and the brand retailer moderated the relationship between spokes-character attitude and brand retailer attitude. The spokes-character theme attitude mediated the influence of the attitude toward the spokes-character on the intention of spokes-character theme patronage, whereas the spokes-character attitude was found to influence the intention of brand retailer patronage through brand retailer attitude.

Keywords: Spokes-character, attitude, patronage intention, affect transfer perspective, spokes-character theme

1. Introduction

Businesses often use spokes-characters to promote their products or services. In recent years, some firms, like McDonald’s, have used nonhuman spokes-characters. Some firms even create interests, personalities, hobbies, birthdays, and preferences for these spokes-characters in addition to accompanying human characters, such as family and friends. Firms may exhibit and sell figurines of their spokes-characters in retail stores or in exclusive theme stores. For example, M&M’S names their spokes-characters according to the color of the chocolates (for example, Mr. Red, Mr. Yellow, and Ms. Green). The firm then commodities these characters by releasing and advertising a series of figurines with unique personalities and interests. The M&M’S company has even established theme stores for these spokes-characters M&M’S World and has combined them with physical retailers, which is an innovative method of advertising.

Although research on spokes-characters is abundant, few studies have investigated spokes-character theme stores. Generally, companies establish spokes-characters in order to increase their brand awareness and consumers’ access to these brands allows them to fulfill their desire to enjoy the brand by purchasing goods, thus achieving the primary objective of the business — revenue. However, there are still some research gaps in the past studies. Urde (1994) has pointed out that popular spokes-characters are capable of enhancing consumer preference for a brand, but fail to describe the mechanism by which the attitude towards

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spokes-character influences the brand preference. Thus, Urde’s research could not offer a suitable theoretical foundation for this concept. Besides, previous researches on spokes-characters have primarily focused on exploring the most appropriate appearance or personality of a spokes-character; however, they have not addressed the most important issue for a firm: whether consumers’ emotional connection to a spokes-character contributes to patronage of the brand and whether that connection translates into real profits for the firm. With this issue unresolved, firms may hesitate to expend resources to promote spokes-characters and spokes-character theme shops.

According to the unidimensional model of attitudes (Lutz, 1991), the past researches sought to discover what special characteristics a spokes-character should possess in order to influence consumer preference or attitude. The current study departed from previous works by adopting the affect transfer perspective, where in it explained the relationships among spokes-character attitude, theme store attitude, and brand attitude. In addition to offering a theoretical foundation for the influence of spokes-characters on brand attitude, this study enhanced the understanding of the reciprocal influence between these three attitudinal constructs. In other words, the current study investigated how attitudes influence other attitudes. Additionally, it tried to investigate the influence of these three attitudinal constructs on theme and brand patronage intention. The results may explain the reasons why firms should launch spokes-character and spokes-character-themed shops.

The next section presents a literature review of spokes-characters and attitude research, followed by a presentation of the research framework and hypotheses. The following two sections present the methodology and results. The final part presents the limitations of this research and conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Spokes-characters

Numerous studies have shown that spokes-characters are very similar to advertising characters and trade characters. Phillips (1996) defined a character as a person, which implies a living personality that includes people, animals, beings (such as monsters and spacemen), and animal objects. This definition is roughly the same as Kirkpatrick’s (1953), which outlined three possible situations. First, the firm may pay a licensing fee to existing cartoon characters who serve as spokes-characters for its products or services (such as Snoopy for MetLife). Second, the firm may create a unique spokes-character that is unrelated to the product’s features (such as Tony the Tiger for Kellogg). Third, the firm may combine the features of its brand or products with a shape (such as Bibendum for Michelin Tire). Phillips further defined trade characters and spokes-characters as fictional, animated beings or objects that have been created to promote a product, service, or idea (Phillips and Gyoerick, 1999). To sum up, advertising characters, trade characters, and spokes-characters all emphasize the living feature of the character (e.g. Garretson and Niedrich, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1953; Phillips and Lee, 2005).

This current study suggests two possible reasons for the wide use of spokes-characters: controllability and efficacy. Nonhuman spokes-characters have controllability that is superior to that of human endorsers because the firm cannot standardize the future behavior of human endorsers. The negative image that results from improper future behavior can negatively influence the endorsement of brands or products (e.g. Till and Shimp, 1998; Stafford et al., 2002). These concerns do not exist when using nonhuman spokes-characters. Likewise, previous studies have shown that the efficacy of nonhuman spokes-characters is equivalent to or even better than the efficacy of human endorsers (Gates, 1989). It is not surprising that firms increasingly turn to nonhuman spokes-characters because of better control and efficacy. It is common practice to use trade characters, trademarks, or brand names to attract the attention of consumers (Ebenkamp,
Ülger (2009) pointed out that consumers generate preferences or purchase intentions for products that have been printed with the spokes-character. The spokes-character can epitomize the product features and assign conceptual or physical images to the brand (Lippe, 2001; Mize and Kinney, 2008). According to Stafford et al. (2002), in the absence of other defining visual cues, a spokesperson may become the tangible representation of a product or service. Based on the study of Garretson and Burton (2005), the high correlation between the attributes of spokes-character and brand will make consumers easily recall and improve their evaluation on the brand if the spokes-character is created for the brand itself. Thus, spokes-character represents the feature of a product based on its personified traits, assigns the imaginary trait to a brand, or becomes the representative of a firm’s image. It coincides with the concept of Callcott and Alvey (1991) that the spokes-character has the ability to create a unique brand or corporate image. Hence, a firm’s primary purpose in creating a character is to promote a brand or to improve the cognition of a brand. If the spokes-character is designed as a figure that is easy to remember, it can enhance the credibility of the manufacturer’s message (Ogilvy and Raphaelson, 1982) and/or allow consumers to identify the product and create positive preferences (Dotz, Morton, and Lund, 1996; Mizerski, 1995; Stewart and Furse, 1986). As Ogilvy (1983) notes, “…trade characters can become the living symbol of the brand and tend to be particularly effective…” (p. 108). Thus, if a firm can develop a spokes-character that is highly relatable with the brand, consumers can develop positive attitudes towards the brand.

Garretson and Niedrich (2004) defined spokes-characters to be nonhuman characters that are used to promote a product or a brand. Subsequently, Heiser, Sierra, and Torres (2008) explored the advertising effect of human pictures. The results indicate that pictures in an advertisement help consumers generate positive evaluations of the advertising, positive brand attitudes, and brand purchase intentions because of the distinctiveness effect. In other words, the use of pictures in advertising is an uncommon method that arouses the attention of consumers, who are more likely to be affected by the advertising. The nonhuman features of spokes-characters distinguish them from the human spokespeople of the past and are more likely to draw the attention and appreciation of consumers. Garretson and Niedrich (2004) summarized previous studies on the appeal of spoke-characters for consumers and came to three major factors. First, relevance to the product combines the product’s features and the traits of the spokes-character, allowing consumers to make the connection during purchase. Second, expertise refers to the way the spokes-character acts as an expert on the product, imparts knowledge, or makes authoritative declarations in the advertisement to strengthen consumers’ opinions of the benefits of the product. Finally, nostalgia refers to the spokes-character’s ability to arouse consumers’ memories of the past. If the spokes-character possesses the aforementioned traits, it is more likely to attract consumers’ attention and emotional involvement, maximizing their effectiveness. In this way, a firm can increase consumers’ trust in the spokes-character and help them to form a positive preference for the brand.

Many researchers have identified important elements that influence consumers’ preferences for spokes-characters. Callcott and Phillips (1996) conducted in-depth interviews on the elements that influence consumers’ preferences for 15 spokes-characters. Based on the responses from 16 respondents, they identified four major elements and classified them into two categories. The first category relates to the specific features of a spokes-character that the firm can control, including personality, physical character, and humor. The second category relates to consumer experience, which is beyond the firm’s control. Specifically, the firm is able to control three out of the four important elements. If a firm can correctly decide on and control the features of a character, it can improve consumers’ memory of the character, reinforce the importance of the character among consumers, and noticeably strengthen consumers’ identification of a product or brand. The second category, consumer experience, represents a broad dimension of preference that encompasses consumers’ prior cultural experiences and experience of the character.
Many studies on spokes-characters have classified the general rules for creating a successful spokes-character. Callcott and Lee’s (1995) classification might be the most famous of these. They classified 700 advertising spokes-characters based on the appearance of the spokes-character, the medium in which it appears, its origin (whether from advertisements or not), and active or passive promotion (the AMOP framework). Phillips and Gyoerick (1999) later added four variables to the classification in order to improve the integrity of the AMOP framework: product type (high versus low involvement), the number and size of character advertisements, character gender, and the ethnicity of the character. In another study, Callcott and Lee (1994) classified 2,000 advertisements with spokes-characters into categories that reflected the spokes-character description—real, fictional, animal personification, animals with animal qualities, galactic beings, and product personification; character behavior—the spokes-character promotes the product or provides a visual demonstration; celebrity status—celebrities that did not originate from advertisements or non-celebrities that originated from advertisements; and character gender—male, female, both male and female characters, or unable to distinguish. Peirce (2001) used the examples of the Energizer Bunny and Aunt Jemima in order to examine the effect of consumers’ gender perception of spokes-characters on advertising. Phillips and Lee (2005) examined 36 websites with spokes-characters to test the spokes-characters’ advertising effectiveness and classified spokes-characters based on existing advertisements. To sum up, these researchers intended to identify the features of the characters that produce effective and attractive advertising effects and to provide useful guidelines for creating spokes-characters.

The primary goal of the aforementioned previous studies on spokes-characters has been to test the relations between their appeal and their effectiveness. Specifically, previous studies hoped to determine the attraction of spokes-characters by analyzing and classifying these characters based on their appearance. Although a firm can create popular spokes-characters based on such classifications, it is unclear whether an attractive spokes-character is more likely to help achieve the firm’s goal of enhancing the consumption of products or services. Therefore, the current study clarifies the mechanism by which spokes-characters influence behavior.

2.2 Attitude

The tripartite view of attitude identifies attitude as the collective name for cognition, attitude, and intention (Lutz, 1991). Later, unidimensionalists clearly identified the relationship between these three factors as “cognition → attitude → intention”. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) defined attitude as the psychological inclination of generating a certain extent of like or dislike by evaluating one specific object. This viewpoint is in accordance with Mackenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986), who suggested that in a common system of influences, cognition appears before affect, which further influences the behavioral intention. Moreover, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined that attitude as the individual’s emotional evaluation degree of preference towards the target. Base on Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) definition, the current study examined three attitudinal constructs—consumers’ attitudes toward spokes-characters, brands, and theme stores. It also examined two intentional constructs, specifically consumers’ intention to patronize the theme store and the brand retailer.

Using the theoretical framework of the hierarchy of effects model, Mackenzie et al. (1986) proposed some structural hypotheses about the mediating role of advertising attitudes. Based on the affect transfer hypothesis, with low customer involvement, advertising attitude will influence brand attitude directly rather than indirectly via brand cognition. Specifically, without careful thinking, consumers’ preference for a brand advertisement will directly influence their attitude toward the brand. The same thought can be found in Silk and Vavra’s (1974) research that individuals will generate positive evaluation on a brand if they like an advertisement. This supports the peripheral route concept by Petty and Cacioppo (1981). Petty and Cacioppo’s proposed elaboration likelihood model (ELM) points out that during the change of their attitudes,
individuals adopt two types of paths: a peripheral route or a central route. “Each type of attitudinal influence occurs in some instances, and the level of personal involvement with an issue or product appears to be one determinant of which type of persuasion occurs” (Petty and Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983, p.143). In other words, which path to take is determined by individual’s involvement toward the object. At a low level of involvement, product-related information such as background music and atmosphere cannot influence advertising results or the establishment of brand attitude—the peripheral route. Conversely, at a high level of involvement, every piece of information in an advertisement can influence the way the consumer processes the product - the central route (Petty et al., 1983). Through peripheral processing, individuals evaluate messages based on other clues that accompany the object, such as the pictures, music, and spokes-characters in the advertisement. In other words, the peripheral route involves choosing clues that are easily noticed and are not considered the actual features of the brand. Thus, if individuals become fond of an advertisement, they might transfer that attitude towards the brand, and vice versa.

The reciprocal mediation hypothesis is based on Heider’s (1946) balance theory of the reciprocal effects between advertising attitude and brand attitude. Based on the balance theory, when a consumer (P) watches a brand’s advertisement (O) and evaluates brand attitude (X), these three variables (P, O, X) will maintain a balance (Heider, 1946; Heider, 1958). In a normal situation, O-X has a positive relationship because the advertisement promotes the brand; therefore, these two variables always have a positive relationship. In order to maintain the balance between the three variables, P-X and P-O must always simultaneously have either a positive or a negative relationship. Thus, consumers will have a positive attitude toward the brand when they like its advertisement, and vice versa. The strength of the influence between them depends on consumers’ familiarity with the brand and the purchase situation. For example, when a new product hits the market, consumers are unfamiliar with the brand, and most consumers can only evaluate the brand based on the advertisement. The consumers’ attitude about the advertisement will positively influence brand attitudes. In contrast, when consumers have an existing attitude toward the brand, that existing attitude will directly influence their advertising attitude.

To sum up, past studies have primarily focused on the constituent elements of successful spokes-characters based on their appearances or features. Based on the unidimensionalist viewpoint, these studies have addressed the influence of cognition on attitude to determine the mechanisms by which positive attitudes are formed. Instead of testing the influence of cognition on attitude, the current study examines the influence of spokes-character attitudes on behavior and tries to clarify the relationships among spokes-characters, spokes-character theme stores, brand retailer attitudes and consumers’ patronage intentions for spokes-character theme stores and brand retailers.

3. Research framework and hypotheses

Utilizing the perspective of Mackenzie et al. (1986), this study includes five constructs: spokes-character attitude (SCA), spokes-character theme attitude (STA), brand retailer attitude (BRA), spokes-character theme patronage intention (STI), and brand retailer patronage intention (BRI). Using structural equation modeling, the current study tests the relationships among these five constructs in order to clarify the spokes-character’s effect on the patronage intention for the brand retailer.

Based on the affect transfer hypothesis of Mackenzie et al., consumers’ attitudes toward a brand’s advertisement can influence their brand attitude when they are in a low involvement situation. In other words, most consumers evaluate a brand without careful consideration based on their original attitude toward the advertisement. This hypothesis is similar to the

The peripheral route concept of Petty et al. (1983), which suggests that clues beyond the message itself often influence consumers’ evaluation of a brand. Generally, attitude is transferred from familiar brands to less familiar ones. The firm usually creates the spokes-character first and then popularizes the spokes-character theme store. Most consumers are not familiar with the spokes-character theme store; consequently, spokes-character attitude and brand retailer attitude will influence consumers’ attitudes towards the unfamiliar theme store. Based on these assumptions, this study proposes Hypotheses H1 and H2 as follows:

H1: Spokes-character attitude (SCA) positively influences spokes-character theme store attitude (STA).

H2: Brand retailer attitude (BRA) positively influences spokes-character theme store attitude (STA).

Based on the unidimensional perspective of attitude, cognition should influence attitude and attitude should influence behavioral intention. Brown and Stayman (1992) conducted a meta-analysis of 47 data points from 43 studies and examined the relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention. The result was consistent with the unidimensional view of cognition $\rightarrow$ attitude $\rightarrow$ behavioral intention. Hence, this study proposes Hypotheses H3 and H4:

H3: Spokes-character theme attitude (STA) positively influences spokes-character theme patronage intention (STI).

H4: Brand retailer attitude (BRA) positively influences brand retailer patronage intention (BRI).

The social identity theory describes that a social category to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995). An individual will change his or her own behavior to be consistent with the group and obtain the group’s approval (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1978). If an individual consumer falls into a specific group with a particular preference towards a spokes-character finds that a particular theme store carries numerous products associated with that spokes-character, then the consumer is likely to visit the store. In other words, consumers are influenced by social identity and their group’s fondness toward a spokes-character which influences their decision to visit the theme store.

H5: Spokes-character attitude (SCA) positively influences spokes-character theme store patronage intention (STI).

As suggested by the social identity perspective, a group that prefers a specific spokes-character will generate theme store patronage intention. A specific group that prefers a specific spokes-character may patronize the theme store because the members of the group determine that a particular theme store sells a comprehensive offering of products that is associated with that spokes-character. Consumers will increase their theme store patronage intention to purchase products that are associated with a spokes-character. Similarly, a brand retailer selling a relatively small number of spokes-character products might nonetheless influence a consumer to increase their brand retailer patronage intention in an attempt to learn the latest news about a spokes-character. In fact, firms introduce spokes-characters not only to promote the brand but also to strengthen the consumers’ purchase behavior. In other words, fondness for a spokes-character will cause consumers to support the retailer and to look for new products that have been endorsed by the spokes-character. Furthermore, it is likely that the influence of social identity will lead to purchasing behavior. In order to clarify the direct
relationship between spokes-character attitude and brand retailer patronage intention, this research proposes Hypothesis H6:

**H6: Spokes-character attitude (SCA) positively influences brand retailer patronage intention (BRI).**

Based on the balance theory, consumers (P) may generate their attitude towards a brand (X) after noticing its spokes-character (O), maintaining the balance among the three. Normally, the brand and the spokes-character have a positive relationship (O-X); hence, the relationship between consumers and the brand (P-X) and between consumers and the spokes-character (P-O) should be entirely positive or entirely negative. That is, when consumers like the spokes-character of a brand, they will become fond of the brand itself, and vice versa. Thus, when consumers have a positive relationship with the brand and the spokes-character, affect transfer will occur. According to the reciprocal mediation hypothesis of Mackenzie et al. (1986), attitude transfers from familiar objects to less familiar objects; however, this hypothesis fails to indicate the existence of any influence when both objects are highly familiar. The current study proposes that consumers’ familiarity with both the brand and the spokes-character generates a reciprocal influence between the two constructs. Thus, under normal circumstances, consumers should be more familiar with the brand, and their attitudes should only transfer from the brand retailer to the spokes-character; however, according to Phillips and Lee (2005), consumers’ fondness for a spokes-character positively influences their advertising attitude and brand attitude. Hence, this study proposes Hypothesis H7:

**H7: When consumers are familiar with both the brand retailer and the spokes-character, brand retailer attitude (BRA) and spokes-character attitude (SCA) will influence one another, and their relative familiarity will moderate this effect.**

4. Methodology

According to Garretson and Niedrich (2004), students are frequently exposed to spokes-character endorsements; hence, they are the major target customers. This study conducted a pre-test on 47 college students in northern Taiwan in order to identify the most familiar spokes-character and the firm to which this character belongs. The questionnaire included pictures of several spokes-characters that are used in the Taiwan service sector. The respondents were asked to fill in the names of the characters and the firms they represented. The pre-test result indicated that both 7-ELEVEn™ (95.74%) and its spokes-character “Open-chan” was the most familiar to respondents (97.87%). Hence, the study chose Open-chan, 7-ELEVEn, and the theme store of the spokes-character, Open Plaza, as the topic of the study. The 7-ELEVEn brands introduced Open-chan as its spokes-character in 2004 and opened the Open-chan theme store in Taipei on July 11, 2006, featuring figurines of the spokes-character. The results of another survey conducted in this study indicate that consumers are not familiar with the Open-chan theme store, possibly due to its location and advertising efforts.

The questionnaire that was used in this study contained five constructs with three items each, for a total of 15 items. In addition, 12 items measured participants’ familiarity with Open-chan, Open-chan Plaza, and 7-ELEVEn. All 27 items were measured on a seven-point scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The SCA were adapted from Mackenzie and Lutz (1989) and Mackenzie et al. (1986) and were defined as consumers’ evaluations of their degree of fondness towards the spokes-character. The BRA adapted items from Homer and Kahle (1990), which are defined as consumers’ degree of fondness for a brand. Finally, the STA items were adapted from Miniard, Sirdeshmukh, and Innis (1992) and were defined as consumers’ degree of fondness for a theme store. BRI and the STI were
specifically developed for this study and were defined as consumers’ intent to visit the theme store and the brand retailer.

Moreover, the study developed 12 items to measure respondents’ familiarity with the spokes-character, brand retailer, and spokes-character theme store. Spokes-character familiarity included “I am familiar with/know the image of Open-chan” and “I can identify with Open-chan”. Items on brand retailer familiarity and spokes-character theme stores included “I am familiar with the location of 7-ELEVEn near my home” and “I am quite familiar with the Open Plaza”.

As mentioned above, consumers in Taiwan are familiar with 7-ELEVEn and Open-chan but are not familiar with the Open-chan theme store. In order to avoid self-selection bias, this study developed a report using both text and pictures in order to explain the “Open Plaza” as a means of familiarizing respondents with the theme store. The respondents were asked to read the report first and then answer the items about each construct in the study. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, and 10 were deleted because they contained missing items. Thus, 290 valid questionnaires were collected.

5. Results

5.1 Hypotheses testing of the direct path (H1~H6)

All fit indices were acceptable and indicated a good model fit, $\chi^2/df = 155.57/80 = 1.945 < 3$, CFI, NFI, and NNFI $> 0.95$, and GFI and AGFA $> 0.8$. Because this study adopted seven-point scales and the mean scores of the SCA, BRA, and STA items were all greater than four, these values indicate positive attitudes among the respondents towards the three constructs. The values of the BRI and STI items were also greater than four, indicating that the respondents positively supported the retailer. Finally, the composite reliability values of the five constructs were all greater than 0.8. The average variance extracted was greater than 0.5, indicating that the items in the study were reliable and valid (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

The results reveal that all of the hypotheses except for H5 and H6 exhibited significantly positive relationships. H1 and H2 were supported by the finding that consumers’ fondness for the brand and the spokes-character influenced their attitude toward the spokes-character theme store. Thus, a firm must consider consumers’ evaluations of the spokes-character and retailer when establishing a spokes-character theme store. With regard to attitudes and intentions, the relationships between STA $\rightarrow$ STI and BRA $\rightarrow$ BRI were both positive. That is, consumers’ fondness for the spokes-character theme/brand retailer further influenced their patronage intention.
Table 1. The descriptive statistics and hypotheses testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs and Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>CR/α</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCA1</td>
<td>5.398</td>
<td>1.158</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td>0.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCA2</td>
<td>5.583</td>
<td>1.271</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCA3</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>1.287</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BRA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRA1</td>
<td>5.532</td>
<td>0.983</td>
<td>0.92/0.919</td>
<td>0.793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA1</td>
<td>4.999</td>
<td>1.161</td>
<td>0.948/0.946</td>
<td>0.859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA2</td>
<td>4.965</td>
<td>1.219</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA3</td>
<td>5.045</td>
<td>1.174</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BRI</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRI1</td>
<td>4.685</td>
<td>1.439</td>
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<tr>
<td>BRI2</td>
<td>5.183</td>
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<td>BRI3</td>
<td>4.797</td>
<td>1.325</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>STI</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>STI1</td>
<td>4.421</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>STI2</td>
<td>4.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>STI3</td>
<td>3.976</td>
<td>1.287</td>
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Model Fit

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Model Fit</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
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<td>Hypotheses</td>
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<td>80</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.98</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>t-value S.D.</th>
<th>Path value</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1:SCA→STA</td>
<td>13.059</td>
<td>0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2:BRA→STA</td>
<td>2.022</td>
<td>0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3:STA→STI</td>
<td>6.628</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4:BRA→BRI</td>
<td>6.952</td>
<td>0.064</td>
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<tr>
<td>H5:SCA→STI</td>
<td>1.007</td>
<td>0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6:SCA→BRI</td>
<td>1.600</td>
<td>0.059</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Hypothesis testing of the moderating effect (H7)

In order to test H7, that is, the relationship between SCA and BRA, this study divided the respondents based on their relative familiarity with the brand, the spokes-character, and the spokes-character theme store. The each construct of familiarity with the brand, the spokes-character, and the theme store contains four items. Thus, totally 12 items were submitted to an exploratory factor analysis. Through primary factor analysis and Varimax rotation, three primary components were extracted. Just like the measurement items, each component
contained four items, and each component had an explanatory capacity of 84.016%. For the four items of the familiarity with the spokes-character, all factor loadings exceeded 0.9. Each item’s factor loading of the familiarity with the brand was between 0.792 and 0.919. The factor loadings for the familiarity with the theme store ranged from 0.669 to 0.888. These results demonstrate the convergence validity of each construct.

After the sum score of these constructs have been calculated and the mean score were consistent with the inference: consumers were familiar with the brand (M=5.88) and the spokes-character (M=5.09) but not with the spokes-character theme store (M=3.04). In order to group respondents based on the mean score, the mean score of familiarity with the spokes-character was subtracted from the mean score of familiarity with the brand. Overall, 140 respondents were grouped into familiar with the spokes-character, whereas 150 respondents were grouped into the unfamiliar one.

The CFA was conducted using a multi-group LISREL procedure in order to compare the familiar group to the unfamiliar group. The first model compared both groups without any restriction to form the baseline. First, the baseline results indicated a good model fit, $\chi^2/d.f. = 244.78/160 = 1.530 < 3$. Second, to test the factor invariance, fixing the factor loading of the two groups to test their consistency. The results demonstrate that $\chi^2 = 250.88$, $d.f. = 175$, $\Delta \chi^2 = 6.1 < \chi^2 (15) = 25$ at $p = 0.05$. The factor loading between the two groups was not significantly different. Finally, the error term for the two groups was further fixed, and the results demonstrate that $\chi^2 = 274.67$, $d.f. = 190$, $\Delta \chi^2 = 29.89 < \chi^2 (15) = 47.33$ at $p = 0.05$, indicating no significant difference between the two groups. Because the factors and error terms of both groups displayed invariance, the measurement of the five constructs in this study are robust. This study used path analysis to test each hypothesis for the two groups separately.

Because H7 features a reciprocal relationship, SCA and BRA must be endogenous variables. Hence, this study set up a random exogenous variable $\xi x(R)$ and conducted a path analysis. Upon serial comparison, the model with no restrictions was considered to be the baseline, with the result indicating that $\chi^2 = 23.67$, $d.f. = 12$. The results of both groups of paths were consistent with the results mentioned above. In other words, H1-H4 showed significantly positive relationships; however, H5 and H6 did not. In order to prevent the setup of $\xi x(R)$ from making any changes to the relationship between the other constructs, the paths from $\xi x(R)\rightarrow$SCA and $\xi x(R)\rightarrow$BRA were all set to 0, with the result indicating that $\Delta \chi^2 = 3.2 < \chi^2 (4) = 9.49$ at $p = 0.05$. Hence, the model in which $\xi x(R)$ influenced SCA and BRA, which were set to 0, did not significantly differ from the baseline. The relationship between the constructs was set as invariant. The results indicate that all $\Delta \chi^2$ were lower than $\chi^2 (1) = 3.84$ at $p = 0.05$. Hence, the path coefficient of H1-H6 between the two groups was invariant. In other words, although the relative familiarity with the brand was different, the influence of other constructs was not significantly different except for the relationship between SCA and BRA.
Table 2. CFA and path analysis invariance testing of the two groups

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>CFA</th>
<th>PATH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>d.f.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>244.78</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loading</td>
<td>250.88</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loading and error term</td>
<td>274.67</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, all hypotheses were supported except for H5 and H6. This study adopted social identity theory as the basis for the theoretical foundation of H5 and H6, and they did not reach significance level. This may be because the strength of an individual’s preference for a spokes-character cannot represent that he/she belongs to or falls into the group or social category like sport team’s fans sufficiently. Although the relationship between SCA and STI did not reach the significance level, SCA→STA (H1) and STA→STI (H3) both showed significantly positive relationships. Spokes-character attitude and spokes-character theme store patronage intention are indirectly related through STA. As such, STA is the full mediator between SCA and STI. We further identified the total effect of SCA→STI, which is 0.52 ($p<0.001$), providing further evidence of a mediation effect. On the other hand, in the relationship of SCA→BRI, those familiar with SCA influenced BRI through BRA. That is, BRA fully mediates the influence of SCA on BRI. Therefore, spokes-character attitude can influence brand attitude and spokes-character theme store attitude through affect transfer.

Hypothesis H7 was tested last (i.e., SCA→BRA and BRA→SCA). Under normal circumstances, attitude transfers from familiar to less familiar brands, that is, BRA→SCA. Hence, the BRA→SCA path in both groups was fixed at first. The SCA→BRA path of the group that was unfamiliar with the spokes-character was set to 0, whereas that of the group that was familiar with the spokes-character was set to free. Thus, the coefficient of SCA→BRA was the relative difference between the two groups. Conceptually, those who were familiar with SCA had a larger portion of effect on SCA→BRA. The results indicated that the coefficient of BRA→SCA was 0.27 ($t=3.33$) and the coefficient of SCA→BRA was 0.32 ($t=2.77$). Hence, H7 was supported. That is, the relative familiarity of respondents toward the brand and the spokes-character seems to moderate the relationship between SCA and BRA.
Similarly, spokes-character attitude can influence the patronage intentions of both brand retailer and spokes-character theme store and therefore help to achieve a firm’s ultimate goal of changing consumer behavior.

6. Conclusions and suggestions

6.1 Discussion

Firms increasingly create unique characters for their brands and use these characters to introduce their products or brands or even to establish theme stores. This study has explored the relationships between spokes-characters attitude, theme stores attitude, and brand attitude through an empirical study of the most important issue for firms, the original brand retailer patronage intention. The results can serve as a practical reference for firms when creating spokes-characters and theme stores. These results also improve our understanding of whether spokes-characters can increase customers’ intention to support the original brand retailer.

This study has detailed the causes of the reciprocal influence between three constructs, spokes-character, spokes-character theme store, and brand retailer from the perspective of affect transfer. Generally, transfer occurs from the familiar to the less-familiar object, and both spokes-character attitude and brand retailer attitude influence spokes-character theme store attitude. Specifically, consumers develop their feelings about a theme store based on their past attitudes toward the brand or the spokes-character.

In addition to the affect transfer from the familiar to the less-familiar object, this study further examined their reciprocal influence. The empirical results indicate that when consumers’ familiarity with a spokes-character and brand reaches a specific level, they will influence one another, and the relative familiarity will moderate the extent of the reciprocal influence. In other words, ordinary consumers will transfer their brand preference to the spokes-character. When they become familiar with the character, another relationship will develop in which the spokes-character will strengthen consumers’ preference for the brand.

Finally, this study has examined the direct influence of consumers’ attitudes toward spokes-characters, spokes-character theme stores, and original brand retailers on their intention to patronize spokes-character theme stores and brand retailers, and has explored whether the introduction of spokes-characters enhances consumers’ patronage intentions, especially with regard to the brand retailer. The results suggest that spokes-character attitude does not directly influence spokes-character theme store patronage intention or brand retailer patronage intention. Consumers’ attitudes toward spokes-characters were observed to positively influence their intention to patronize the spokes-character theme store via their spokes-character theme store attitude, whereas spokes-character attitudes were observed to positively influence brand retailer patronage intention via brand retailer attitude.

6.2 Management implications

The following conclusions can provide suggestions to firms that are introducing spokes-characters and theme stores. First, consumers’ attitude towards theme stores can be influenced by their attitude towards spokes-characters and brands. A firm should consider consumers’ attitudes toward the original brand in addition to Callcott and Lee’s (1995) work of evaluating other elements, such as the spokes-character’s shape and features, so as to make the spokes-character popular and transfer consumers’ affect to the spokes-character theme store.

Second, brand attitude can influence consumers’ attitudes towards the spokes-character, and spokes-character attitude can influence brand attitude. Therefore, after a firm creates a specific spokes-character and the market becomes familiar with it, consumers’ affect towards the character will strengthen the original brand. Hence, when a firm wants to strengthen consumers’ familiarity with a brand, a spokes-character will have a positive effect over time.
Finally, spokes-character attitude can influence consumers’ intention to patronize theme stores via their attitude toward the spokes-character theme and can influence brand patronage intention. Hence, if a firm aims to attract more customers to a spokes-character theme store, it would be insufficient to only introduce the spokes-character. The firm also needs to spend more effort to develop and advertising the spokes-character theme store. More importantly, if a firm aims to attract more brand retailer customers by introducing a spokes-character, the firm can increase customers’ patronage intention by strengthening their brand attitude, for example, by increasing the frequency of spokes-character endorsements of their retail brand. Only after consumers become familiar with and fond of the spokes-character can the desirable effects be realized.

6.3 Limitations and future research

In order to understand the thought processes of the respondents, this study used real spokes-characters and their associated brands with which the participants were familiar. Thus, this study adopted investigative method rather than an experimental manipulation. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be applied to all brands.

This study only considered spokes-characters. Many brands are still endorsed by real people. Thus, it is uncertain whether the results for other brands would be the same. The future studies investigate human spokespeople are encouraged.

Moreover, this study examined the relationship among spokes-character attitude, brand retailer attitude, and spokes-character theme store attitude and behavioral intentions, but it did not address the formation of cognition. Most of the existing literature has explored consumers’ cognition and attitude toward spokes-characters but has not examined consumers’ cognition, attitudes, and behavior all together. We recommend that future studies examine these three factors together.

Finally, this study has examined the relationship between spokes-character attitude and brand attitude. Another important dimension of spokes-characters is their fitness for the original brand image. Because this study only focused on one brand and one spokes-character, the degree of fitness has decided already. Hence, we recommend that future studies investigate the fitness dimension of affect transfer.

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