



The Rise of Virtual Image Endorsement in Visual Culture Context

Yichen Feng

School of Humanities, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai, China,
610000

diana_feng2001@163.com

Abstract. Compared with the text advertising, in modern society, visual culture has become the mainstream form of advertising aesthetic. In recent years, with the rapid development of the digital entertainment industry, game characters and virtual idols gradually become important symbols for the communication of visual culture. They are widely used in advertising communication and brand marketing, and become an important part of entertainment marketing. This paper will explore the formation, development, and influence of virtual image endorsement, and take the Chinese AI spokesperson "Liu Yexi" as example to analyze how the virtual endorsement figures (communication strategy, character design, and other marketing schemes) support the visual cultural connotation of the new generation of "consumer idols". With the improvement of the acceptance of visual culture, virtual spokespersons will be favored by more advertising and product dealers because of their characteristics, such as being easy to shape and control, and will become an indispensable presence in the future entertainment marketing scene.

Keywords: virtual image; Entertainment marketing; Advertising communication; Visual culture communication

1 Introduction

At present, the application of virtual images has covered many industries, including performing arts, singing, games, live broadcasting, advertising, and so on. Nowadays, research on avatars in China has gradually increased, but the field is relatively narrow, and the formation as well as trend of localization research are also relatively scarce. Among them, there are relatively few studies on the impact of avatars and advertising marketing. Most of the research cases are early-stage successful IP, and there is a lack of new case analysis in the epidemic era after 2020. This paper is based on the era of visual culture gradually replace language and culture background, and it attempts to analyze the reasons that the virtual image endorsement go virus in China, as well as to explore the advantage of virtual image as a pitchman. In the following part, the paper chooses, "2021 phenomenal virtual person, Liu Yexi" [1] as a case, to analysis the success path of the new era's virtual spokesperson. This paper hopes to provide inspiration

and referential methods for manufacturers, so that more people can see the possibility of virtual image endorsement.

This paper mainly uses the literature research method, qualitative analysis method, and case study method to predict the development of the virtual image endorsement in the future, hoping to promote the development and vigorous development of the virtual market. By enumerating its advantages for the relevant marketing organizations, businesses can provide cost and risk foresight. At the same time, consumers can also understand its suitability with The Times, improving people's universal identity and acceptance of the virtual image.

2 Overview

With the continuous development of digital culture, language culture is gradually transferred to visual culture, and humans' cognitive will gradually transfer to visual focus. The concept of advertising spokespersons was first introduced by Friedman (1979) [2], who divided spokespersons into three categories: experts, typical consumers and celebrities. Among them, the advertising persuasion of celebrities mainly relies on the appeal of personal value or personality charm. However, the appearance of virtual image spokespersons has achieved a breakthrough in brand presentation advertising. Animations and games even create characters out of thin air to replace stars and celebrities. The rise of virtual idol endorsement reflects the further expansion of the influence of visual culture. People have been gradually dissatisfied with the visual experience of human characters, and have turned to enhancing the exquisite visual adjustment in the creation of virtual characters to bestow the image of public aesthetic and emotional needs.

In recent years, the application of virtual images in advertising has gradually heated up the topic, and it is still a neoteric concept in some industries. The number of literature is relatively small, involves only a few fields, and the perspective is broad and shallow.

At present, the literature related to visual cultural avatar advertising can be divided into three types. First, the process of text and image transformation of advertisements in the context of visual culture is taken as the research axis, such as in CAI (2006) [3], Zou (2008) [4], etc. Based on the historical timeline, these papers analyze the advertising changes in the era of visual culture and the transformation, adaptation, and innovation of image advertising in modern culture. Second, it focuses on the application of visual culture advertising in social propaganda, including the study of new media animation advertising and animation micro film advertising, as well as the effectiveness analysis of a advertising. For example, Zhao (2019) [5], Yu (2011) [6], and Zhang (2010) [7]. Third, Fan (2021) [8] and Zhang (2020) [9] were used as representatives to explore the research on the construction process of virtual image IP, which involved the creation of the commercial virtual image, the technical advantages of virtual character IP operation, audience selection, profit model, and so on.

3 Rise of Visual Culture

3.1 The foundation of visual cultural context

The media culture is gradually shifting from the written culture to the visual culture. Under this influence, advertising communication, as a major carrier of the media, has shown obvious visual image characteristics. The consumer image of the advertising spokesperson has also changed from the meaning of setting an example or education to the meaning of entertainment.

In the past few decades, the consumption idol has replaced the production idol. However, with the further development of visual culture, people are more and more able to accept the representative significance of image symbols, such as the Olympic mascots, brand personification portraits. People create an image and endow it with cultural connotation and meaning, which contributes to the virtual image endorsement that is widely praised by the public. This concept of communication need to be built in an era with a strong tolerance for visual images. In the era of visual culture, the extremely high virtual reality technology provides innovative plasticity and interactivity for the virtual image, so that the communication subject can obtain the recognition of the current mainstream culture in the process of communication.

Influenced by the communication of visual culture, the phenomenon of the intersection and separation of visual image and reality appears in advertising information [4], which is an important social basis for the rationalization of virtual spokespersons.

3.2 Definition of virtual image

The term “avatar” originally refers to an avatar in a game or animation, and can be referred to as an anime character or other object in the two-dimensional world. Because of the nature of its commercial output, it has a wide range of audiences and recognition. As we all know, celebrity endorsement advertisements can expand the influence, popularity, and recognition of the brand through their fans, and can also provide product quality certification for the public through their credibility. Now it seems that most of the virtual avatars have the same function. At present, avatars that have become virtual spokespersons will also participate in the production of advertisements and sales activities of companies.

Since consumers and avatars can have close psychological contact and empathy in the process of watching movies and television programs or experiencing games, the gathering effect of avatars and today's stars is actually similar to some extent. Avatars can also enhance consumers' goodwill towards brands, help consumer build a deep emotional connection with the brand, and further influence consumers' purchase intentions. The qualitative experimental results of Xu (2020) [10] show that virtual spokespersons can significantly affect consumers' impulse buying intentions. Based on the different models, when consumers are faced with real goods and hedonic goods, they all have the possibility to increase impulse buying, which means that virtual image endorsement has applicable space in many fields. There is no specific distribution characteristic of the brand endorsed by the virtual image. At present, the common industries

using virtual spokespersons in China include cosmetics, clothing, snacks, daily necessities, electronic products, restaurants, home appliances, and many other fields.

4 The development advantages of virtual image endorsement

4.1 Opportunity to take the stage

In the past, the bond between a brand's image spokesperson and the brand was not that strong. Especially before the melamine milk powder incident in 2008, as the bundling relationship between celebrity spokespersons and brands was not tight, the celebrity spokesperson was less negatively affected. But after this incident, the country's attention to food safety has raised to a new level.

In early 2009, China's food safety law stipulated that if food products have quality problems, food advertising spokespersons will be jointly and severally liable. Despite this, food advertisements still occupy an important place in the commodity advertising market, and the benefits of TV network advertisements to products and businesses make it impossible to give up the means of advertising. But stars are more cautious about receiving food advertising because of the potential for joint and several liability. In this case, the main body of the major advertising campaigns are more inclined to choose the virtual image spokespersons to replace the stars and celebrities.

4.2 Advantages of virtual image endorsement

4.2.1. More plasticity. Avatars are more malleable than live stars. The female heroes of the League of Legends, Ahri, Kaisa, Evelynn and Akali, form the virtual idol group KD/A and carry out "idol activities" around the world. Due to the popularity of the game itself and the beautiful voice and graceful body shape that can be manually adjusted, this female group team is loved by audiences all over the world. The KD/A virtual girl group has also endorsed many products. For example, among the types of e-sports products, they endorsed the Logitech 6 KDA series peripherals, including wireless headset, mouse, cabinet. Many buyers said they would still be willing to buy the limited peripherals, even if only the cover and paint were changed. Game peripheral companies struggle to find influential brand spokespeople in the real world market, while they find more suitable partners in the virtual quadratic market, which is richer in possibilities and diversity.

At the same time, while real people may fade away, virtual characters remain beautiful in their appearances. By making subtle adjustments at different times, cultures, subject backgrounds, and consumer groups, products can be remarketed to different audiences.

4.2.2. Easy to control. The second advantage of avatars is the controllability of the avatar's behavior. Human spokespeople are uncontrollable. In recent years, stars and

celebrities are less likely to cherish their public personas. They blot their copybooks frequently, and the number of fans can drop dramatically overnight. The disqualification and failure of a star means the total collapse of the capital behind him, and the brands that are deeply tied to these stars will suffer a heavy blow. Compared to real people, avatars won't behave badly.

The Honor of Kings, a Chinese MOBA game, has conducted joint campaigns with various beauty and household goods brands. The heroes in this game have endorsed products including circle lenses, ice cream, eyeshadow, and cookies. Unlike real stars, even if Honor of Kings' subsequent development is sluggish, it will not affect the sales of the products to a large extent. This is because the virtual spokespeople themselves will not cause individual behavior to get out of control, and then smear the enterprise or brand. On the contrary, if the spokespersons are properly created, the two companies can even achieve a win-win effect, thereby entering the cultural industry market with high returns and high output.

4.3.3. Particularity. Original avatars are unique to the brand. Through the collaborative work of art, product design, market analysis and other departments, the company design a visual image that represents the brand's characteristics, for example, the Haier Brothers from Haier Group, the clowns of McDonald's and the Colonel of KFC. These images have been through ten or even decades of efforts to unify the endoplasm of the product with the outerplasm of the endorsement image, successfully distinguishing the uniqueness of the product. This uniqueness also avoids the confusing experience brought about by market homogeneity.

Human spokespersons may provide endorsement services for multiple brands at the same time, resulting in "dilution effects" and "aesthetic fatigue". In the fan economy, fans are chasing celebrities more than the product itself, which leads to a certain level of engagement decline.

In short, the design of avatars can seek advantages and avoid disadvantages, create or select characters that are conducive to the development of the brand, and have stronger controllability and plasticity in advertising.

5 Case analysis: Liu Yexi

On October 31, 2021, Liu's official account posted its first video on TikTok (Chinese version), gaining millions of followers. It took three years to build up the ability to consistently generate hits in the traditional content circuit, and Liu's success is surprising, but not unexpected.

The team integrated the historical background of visual culture on the basis of exquisite special effects so that the content of the video is suitable for all ages, and it has gained a relatively wide audience. In terms of market orientation, Liu aims to develop in the two hot markets: technology and beauty. According to the description of Liang, CEO of the company [11], Liu Yexi should have further development in the meta verse, IP, and virtual human fields in the future.

5.1 "Story-building" of Consumer Virtual Idols

If the former celebrities were the first generation of consumer idols, then the current new virtual idols are the second generation of consumer idols. At the same time, in the process of product promotion, most of Liu's promotion is in the form of videos, and each video has a certain main story, which is different from the traditional product from all angles and all-round display.

In terms of creation, Liu Yexi's team adheres to originality, focusing on gorgeous and grandiose high-quality special effects shots to give the audience a refreshing visual experience. Liu's video production breaks the low threshold of filming on the Tiktok platform. All the videos are presented with high-cost, long-cycle advertisements, and each installment is a high-quality special-effects blockbuster. The team's appearance and overall design of Liu are mainly based on the popular futuristic sci-fi and cyberpunk styles of recent years, which meet the demand for visual stimulation. The exquisite character modeling, smooth movements, the beautiful cyberpunk background, and the fantastic character setting add to the building blocks of Liu Yexi.

In terms of plot, Liu Yexi's video content is accompanied by emotion, covering a wide range of emotional themes, including not only the feelings of compatriots in distress, such as China's anti-epidemic, the Zhengzhou flood, and other social events, but also the warm companionship between relatives. In the process of advertising communication, while highlighting the brand personality, the theme of traditional Chinese morality can trigger a deeper emotional resonance in the audience.

5.2 Cultural representation of image design

Liu Yexi's image design has a unique aesthetic and cultural identity in China. According to Liu Yexi's creative team [12], in the process of Liu Yexi's image shaping, the team referred to the appearance characteristics of the Chinese movie star Li Ruotong, combined with the current aesthetic trend, and then create a female character with rapid spread ability.

Liu Yexi has the standard distribution of Chinese facial features, a beautiful oval faces, soft eyebrows, and the attractive eyes of a red phoenix, which constitute a highly aesthetic Chinese model. Her makeup is mainly based on classical Chinese makeup, inspired by the mother-of-pearl and butterfly makeup of the Tang Dynasty. The color of the makeup is mainly fluorescent blue, representing the sense of technology, which makes the facial makeup part of the collision between technology and beauty.

In terms of clothing, although Liu's clothes will be changed in every video, most of them are Hanfu or ancient Chinese clothes. Her widely recognized aesthetic and easy cultural identity make her more continuous and communicative. Therefore, it has a wide range of cosmetics products, clothing, scientific and technological products, etc.

5.3 The collision between the personage and the characteristics of the endorsed product – Business context

On March 18, 2022, the linkage between Clarins and Liu Yexi officially opened the first commercial cooperation of this virtual beauty. An exclusive concept promotion video was officially released, in which Liu broke the dimensional wall and endorsed the brand in an ancient white dress.

At present, Liu Yexi has taken over the endorsement of high-end products, including mobile phones, domestic cars, high-end cosmetics, etc. As a virtual character, the starting point of his business activities is in the same field as a very high position. All of these are attributed to the communication strategy and marketing means of the marketing team. Liu's team chose to position the avatar and then anchor its commercial value.

On the Internet, male users are generally attracted to dramatic images and cool special effects, while female users prefer aesthetically pleasing objects and emotional stories. So the team chose the collision of technology and beauty, which perfectly matches the preferences of both sexes, and reduces the mutually exclusive content caused by gender differences. This gives her a unique advantage in endorsements. For example, in the advertising cooperation between Liu and Xopeng Automobile, she portrayed the sense of power of auto parts in the way of attracting monsters, which cast a mysterious sense of science and technology on ordinary modern cars. However, all of these are not incompatible with her own settings and product characteristics, but amplify the technology of the product, making people believe that the product's performance is superior.

6 Conclusion

Rapid changes in digital computer technology have opened up a broader space for the development of image advertising. Compared with a real person, it is easier for virtual character images to show abstract concepts and fit with complex advertising content. They provide viewers with real visual effects, show surreal special effects, and improve the enjoyment and appeal of advertising.

In the coming decades, virtual spokesmen may become an even more important form of visual cultural expression, appearing not only in advertisements, but perhaps also in news, broadcasts, or television. We should seriously study and explore the possibility of virtual spokespersons, so as to give full play to the role of virtual spokespersons.

At present, there are still many shortcomings in this paper, such as the use of qualitative analysis but a lack of exclusive data support, which makes the conclusion of this paper not full enough. The paper uses only one detailed analysis of a role, and more cases are not supported. Therefore, in the future, the author will conduct a more detailed study on the representation of virtual characters from two aspects: qualitative analysis and case expansion.

References

1. China News Network (2022) "Liu Yexi, the phenomenon virtual person, represents the new future of the content field?"
2. Friedman, H. H., & Friedman, L. (1979). Endorser effectiveness by product type. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 19 (5), 63-71.
3. CAI. Visual culture context advertising communication [J]. *Probe*, 2006 (6) : 187-189. The DOI: 10.16059 / j.carol carroll nki cn43-1008 / c. 2006.06.065.
4. Zou D. The Influence of Visual Culture on Advertising Communication [D]. Henan University, 2008. (in Chinese)
5. ZHAO N. Exploration of the communication influence of visual culture: A case study of subway advertising [J]. *News research guide*, 2019, 10(16):221-222.]
6. Liu Junxing. On the advantages and management of Virtual image Spokesmen in advertising [J]. *News and Communication*, 2010(11):66.]
7. Yu Qinmi. Shaping of Virtual Endorsement Image in New Media Advertising [D]. Wuhan Textile University, 2011.
8. Fan Xuechen. IP brand endorsement of a virtual image operations research [D]. Hunan institute of technology, 2021. The DOI: 10.27906 /, dc nki. Gngly. 2021.000217.
9. Zhang Xingyi. This virtual red image of IP development research [D]. Xiangtan university, 2020. The DOI: 10.27426 /, dc nki. Gxtd. 2020.001703.
10. Xu Qianqian. The influence of virtual Endorser characteristics on consumers' impulse purchase intention [D]. Shanxi normal university, 2020. DOI: 10.27287 /, dc nki. Gxsu. 2020.000179.
11. Sina Technology (2021) Dialogue with Liu Yexi's creative Team: The Pursuit of philosophy and humanity in the metaverse between the virtual and the real

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

