



Character Branding Strategies in Modern Japanese Pop Culture

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Abstract. Japanese pop culture has evolved into a global phenomenon that serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as a marketing tool through the use of fictional characters from various media. Through fictional characters serving as brand mascots, these characters function as a means of communication across generations and cultures, making them a crucial element in the global dissemination and influence of Japanese popular culture. This study aims to uncover character branding strategies involving brand personality in modern Japanese pop culture, specifically examining how fictional characters can influence a brand's recognition among consumers through their personality. This study employs a quantitative method using a survey on character personality within character branding in modern Japanese pop culture. Based on data analysis, the character personality of these fictional characters helps consumers recognize the brand and serves as a character branding strategy, although it does not entirely determine consumers' purchase intention.

Keywords: Character Branding, Japanese Pop Culture, Brand Personality, Fictional Character

1. Introduction

Globalization has changed the competitive order between countries, where dominance no longer relies solely on traditional industries but, over time, has evolved with the times and shifted toward the creative industries and cultural exports. This phenomenon has established new standards in international economic dynamics, where visual appeal has become the most important factor in winning over the global market. Japan, as one of the wealthiest nations, has built a robust economy and advanced industries since the end of World War II [1]. One industry that has successfully captured global interest is modern pop culture, which has evolved to serve not only as entertainment but also as a marketing strategy through the use of fictional characters from anime, manga, and video games. By leveraging iconic fictional characters, Japan has transcended the limitations of traditional marketing, thereby capturing consumer attention, fostering emotional connections, and strengthening brand identity transforming these elements into high-value economic assets.

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A character from Japanese pop culture that is widely recognized around the world is Pikachu. Its popularity, which surpasses that of many other characters, has made Pikachu not only a fictional character but also a high-value branding asset that represents the identity and image of Pokémon on a global scale. Pokémon, which stands for Pocket Monsters, was created by Satoshi Tajiri. Pokémon originally originated from a game released in 1990, which later evolved and was adapted into an anime. In an article published on the Gamedia website, the Pokémon character named Pikachu is no stranger to Pokémon fans; Pikachu first appeared in 1996 as one of the characters in the Pokémon Red and Green games. Pikachu was initially just one of the 151 Pokémon in the game. However, after the anime was released, Pikachu began to gain wider recognition as the partner of the main character, Ash Ketchum (Satoshi). Pikachu's popularity grew significantly, surpassing that of other characters, and as a result, Pikachu became a global icon representing Pokémon.

Through characters like Pikachu, a brand can become widely recognized, making this a potentially profitable strategy [2]. found that fictional characters can help make a brand's personality more recognizable through collaborations or character creation. In the context of Japanese culture, the effectiveness of this strategy stems from the characters' ability to foster consumer engagement by forming complex psychological bonds. Previous research also indicates that branding strategies serve not only as tools for differentiation but also as means of building emotional connections between brands and their audiences through the creation of shared values [3].

In this study, characters play a role in shaping brand identity through character branding, and how this strategy can attract an audience based on brand personality. Character branding strategies, viewed through the lens of audience engagement fostered by brand personality, can influence purchase intent among fans. Through character branding built on a strong and clearly defined foundation, companies can foster trust, inspire loyalty, and expand their consumer base more effectively [4]. It is this positive brand image that serves as the key to forming a lasting bond between the brand and consumers. This emotional bond, in turn, generates deep loyalty and enhances consumer loyalty [5]. Furthermore, a strong brand image plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' perceptions of the value of a product or service. Brands with a strong and positive image instill firm confidence and trust in consumers [6]. A solid brand image provides a strong foundation for companies to execute product marketing strategies efficiently, while also helping brands maintain and increase their market share [7].

However, despite the fact that brand personality has already been applied to fictional characters through marketing collaborations, there remains a need to understand how a brand's identity as reflected through its mascot can shape consumer perceptions via brand personality, and how this, in turn, influences purchase intention through the fictional character's relatability and appeal to consumers. Based on this, this study aims to examine consumers' perceptions of brand personality through character branding and to analyze the reasons for its effectiveness as a sales strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fictional Characters as Character Branding

The use of brand characters or mascots has developed into an established marketing strategy for building corporate identity and capturing public attention. Mascots serve as powerful visual stimuli, fostering consumer engagement and boosting brand awareness. Mascots are essential visual tools that enable brands to capture attention and differentiate themselves from competitors. A mascot that represents a brand's identity and personality can reinforce the brand's positive image in the minds and hearts of consumers [8].

The role of a mascot goes beyond mere visual recognition. A mascot serves as an embodiment of the brand's personality, capable of bridging and fostering an emotional connection between the brand and its audience [9]. Furthermore, product design serves as a stronger antecedent (triggering factor) for college students and products with high self-signaling characteristics (i.e., products that allow consumers to build and express their self-image through brand choices) [10]. Figurativeness and its extreme form, organicity, are the primary determinants of cognitive responses to brand identity elements. Their research indicates that semantic repetition is beneficial for creating recall and evoking associations, while semantic divergence is advantageous for ensuring recognition. The same principle can be extended to mascots as figurative visual brand elements. The more figurative a mascot is that is, the more it can "put a face on an abstract product" the easier it is for consumers to recall and recognize it, thereby strengthening the brand's position in consumers' top of mind [11]. The effectiveness of this strategy has led to the widespread adoption of mascots across various industries, including FMCG, where examples such as the Amul Girl (Amul Butter) and the Doughboy (Pillsbury) have become iconic figures.

The effectiveness of this mascot is fundamentally rooted in the concept of brand personality. Brand personality is the embodiment of human characteristics applied to a brand. [12] demonstrate that anthropomorphically designed mascots can function as 'affective touchpoints,' creating emotional attachment even without two-way interaction, and making consumers feel a more personal connection to the brand they represent. Through brand personality, it is easier for consumers to identify with and feel a connection to a brand. These characteristics can manifest in various forms, such as a brand image that is friendly, innovative, or even conveys a sense of luxury [13]. As visual media evolves, the effectiveness of traditional mascots is now shifting toward more engaging elements of popular culture, one of which involves the use of anime and manga aesthetics. In recent decades, the trend of using anime and manga in advertising and branding strategies has become increasingly prominent. Japan, as the birthplace of anime and manga, has naturally become a pioneer in the use of these media. The momentum from a broad, cross-generational fan base has driven animation studios to collaborate extensively with commercial brands [14].

The strength of Japanese anime and manga comes from several unique aspects. For example, the manga *Bokutachi Wa Benkou Ga Dekinai*. This manga offers a unique approach to characterization through learning behaviors that can serve as a lesson for its audience [15]. This aligns with the view of Kubo, the producer of Pokémon, who

believes that the primary strength of anime lies in the characters' ability to evoke viewers' emotions through deeply expressive feelings, as well as their capacity to create a unique, adventure-filled world with dynamic character development.

2.2 Brand Personality

A brand can indeed possess a personality similar to that of a human, consisting of five dimensions: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness [16]. Sincerity is a trait characterized by honesty, authenticity, and cheerfulness. Sincerity is manifested through product quality and authenticity, while honesty in the brand's image is reflected through simplicity and cheerfulness. Second is Excitement, a dynamic character marked by high energy and imagination in driving differentiation and innovation. Excitement consists of being imaginative and up-to-date. Third is Competence, which refers to the capabilities a company possesses that customers can rely on and trust. Competence encompasses reliability and success. Fourth is Sophistication, a characteristic associated with exclusivity shaped by an excellent reputation, brand image, and captivating appeal. Sophistication is associated with the upper class. Fifth is Ruggedness, which is a brand characteristic related to the brand's ability to handle outdoor work, as well as the durability and resilience of the product. Ruggedness is associated with being outdoorsy and tough.

2.3 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention can be measured using four indicators: transactional intention, referential intention, preferential intention, and exploratory intention [16]. However, in this study, the researchers used only three indicators: transactional intention, referential intention, and exploratory intention. Transactional interest refers to the tendency of consumers to consistently purchase products produced by a company, based on high trust in that company. Referential interest refers to the tendency of consumers to recommend the product to others. This interest arises after consumers have gained experience and information about the product. Exploratory interest describes consumer behavior characterized by a constant search for information regarding products of interest and seeking information to support the positive attributes of those products.

3 Methodology

This study employs a quantitative descriptive approach aimed at describing phenomena based on numerical data obtained from respondents. This approach was chosen because it allows for a systematic description of respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and tendencies regarding brand personality, as well as the extent to which purchase intention is formed. Research data was collected via a Likert-scale questionnaire distributed online to fans of Japanese pop culture in Indonesia who are familiar with Pokémon and Pikachu.

Data was collected using a 1–5 scale questionnaire with five categories ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The ideal number of respondents is 10:1 that

is, 10 respondents per indicator [17]. Therefore, in this study, with 16 indicators as shown in Table 1, an ideal sample size of 160 respondents would be required to ensure accurate research results. The study ultimately collected data from 165 respondents.

Table 1. Variable and questionnaire indicators.

Variable	Indicator	Statement
<i>Brand Personality</i>	Sincerity	The brand mascot makes the brand appear more friendly.
		The brand mascot makes the brand appear trustworthy.
	Excitement	The brand has an attractive mascot.
		The brand mascot makes the brand appear not boring.
	Competence	The brand mascot makes the brand appear high-quality.
		The brand mascot makes the brand appear to have value.
	Sophistication	The brand mascot makes the brand appear classy.
		The brand mascot makes the brand appear elegant.
	Ruggedness	The brand mascot makes the brand appear strong.
		The brand mascot makes the brand appear durable.
<i>Purchase Intention</i>	Referential Intention	I am willing to recommend this brand's product to others because of its mascot.
		I would enthusiastically tell others about and recommend this product because of its character.
	Transactional Intention	I am interested in purchasing this product because of the presence of its mascot.
		I intend to purchase this product in the future because of the presence of its mascot.
	Exploratory Intention	This brand's mascot makes me interested and curious about the brand.
		I want to learn more and seek further information about the brand because of its mascot.

The samples were analyzed using the Jomovi application by measuring the predetermined variables and indicators. Data analysis was conducted by assessing reliability and performing linear regression to identify trends in respondents' perceptions of brand personality derived from character branding and their potential purchase intent. The results of the analysis are presented as mean values and percentages to illustrate the respondents' level of agreement with each statement.

4 Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure that the indicators of the variables used were valid and reliable in accordance with the Brand Personality and Purchase Intention theories, as shown in Table 2. The mean in the data represents the average of responses on a 1–5 scale; each question had a score exceeding 3 (neutral), so the results of each response tended to lean toward agreement with each question. SD stands for standard deviation; this value is used to determine the dispersion of data within a sample and assess how consistent the data is with the mean. Table 2 shows that each indicator has a value greater than 0.6, indicating that each indicator has consistent responses. Furthermore, the Cronbach's Alpha (CR) data, used as a reliability test, shows a value exceeding 0.70, indicating that the data is accurate and consistent with the theory employed. For the Brand Personality variable, the CR is 0.832, and for Purchase Intention, it is 0.878.

Table 2. Reliabilities brand personality and purchase intention.

Variable	Indicator	Skala	Mean	SD	CR
Brand Personality	Sincerity	1-5	4.31	0.69	0.832
	Excitement	1-5	4.35	0.697	
	Competence	1-5	4.2	0.706	
	Sophistication	1-5	3.98	0.871	
	Ruggedness	1-5	4.21	0.755	
Purchase Intention	Referential	1-5	4.11	0.789	0.878
	Transactional	1-5	4.17	0.846	
	Explorative	1-5	4.19	0.813	

Based on the data in Table 2, Pikachu, as the main mascot of the Pokémon brand, can be said to have a brand personality that resonates closely with consumers. Its presence serves not only as a visual element but also as a representation of the brand's uniqueness and core values through sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. This aligns with the argument by [8], who emphasize that a mascot integrated as part of the brand's identity can significantly strengthen the brand image, making it more human and "close to the hearts" of consumers.

Furthermore, to understand the relationship between brand personality and purchase intention and to measure how effective the brand mascot is as a marketing strategy data

analysis was conducted using Linear Regression. In Table 3, the B-value is the regression coefficient indicating the increase in the variable when it rises by one unit. Thus, the Pikachu character in the Pokémon brand has a coefficient value of 0.533. P is the significance level, indicating whether the effect of B is statistically significant. P must be <0.05 to indicate significant data. The results show a P-value of 0.001, indicating that the results are significant.

Table 3. Table captions should be placed above the tables.

Character	B	P	R ²
Pikachu	0.533	<0.001	0.178

R² is the coefficient of determination used to indicate the relationship between the brand personality variable and the purchase intention variable. The data shows that Pikachu, as the character branding for Pokémon, exhibits a relationship between brand personality and purchase intention of 0.178, or 17.8%. This indicates that Pikachu's brand personality, as the character branding for Pokémon, has the potential to influence consumer purchase intention by 17.8%.

Based on the research results in Table 3, it was found that the influence of Pikachu's brand personality has a contribution percentage that is not overly dominant on consumer purchase intention directly. Nevertheless, this variable still plays a crucial role as a brand awareness strategy to bridge the gap between consumers and brand identity. This finding aligns with the views of [9] and [2], both of whom argue that characters play a greater role in creating deep emotional bonds and serve as powerful memory triggers in consumers' minds. Such bonds enable consumers to put a face on products they do not recognize but can identify and remember as a brand's character [11].

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that in this study, the relationship between brand personality and purchase intention regarding Pikachu as a Pokémon character branding can serve as a strategy for identity recognition through the character, as compared to a marketing strategy focused on profit. A purchase intention of 17.8% shows that the influence of purchase intention is not dominant. However, the relationship between the character and the brand through brand personality indicates that the Pikachu character is influential and serves as the personality of the Pikachu brand. This suggests that brand personality through a character can be a strategy to attract consumers to become more familiar with and connected to the brand through the character.

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