

Leveraging Cartoon Characters, Fictional Figures and Mascots in Public Relation to Shape Brand Perception and Audience Connection.

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Abstract- Fictional characters are becoming a common means of communication in a modern media world where the audience is suffering from "digital fatigue" and where the term "Zero-Click content" has entered the vocabulary. Within a now "digital fatigued" and "Zero-Click content" saturated media landscape, it is more and more common for organizations to use fictional characters to connect abstract corporate entities with the emotional lives of consumers. This research explores the strategic use of cartoon characters, mascots and fictional figures in the context of Public Relations (PR) for brand perception and audience engagement. The study, which used a quantitative research design and collected from 133 respondents, studied the effect of character promotion on brand visibility and consumer behaviour through five landmark PR campaigns (Amul Girl, Shinchan x Crocs, Motu Patlu x Curefoods) and a listed review of 22 research papers. The results revealed that fictional characters functioned as strong "visual anchors": 75.94% of the respondents agreed that characters were effective in attracting initial interest in exploring a brand. This is confirmed by eye tracking data with a visual fixation rate of 93.4% for character-branded packaging. The research findings suggest that Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) are the factors affecting the effectiveness of character-driven PR through the "friendship illusion" and transferring the symbolic character to the product. The study also points to the need to keep the narrative consistent and overcome the "Uncanny Valley" to ensure trust in the brand, as the industry moves towards virtual influencers leveraging artificial intelligence. The findings are a PR practitioners' "Mascot Bible" that will help them develop "mental availability" and long-term brand equity in an ultra-competitive marketplace.

Keywords: Brand Mascots, Fictional Figures, Brand Perception, Audience Connection and Digital PR.

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is the process of sharing information, ideas, and emotions between individuals and groups so as to produce a common understanding. In social terms, it is the cement that unites people together and organises their action. Communication has changed in this digital era, and is no longer a two-way process between people, but the transmission of messages to a large, diverse, and often dispersed audience, usually through a medium, like print, broadcast, or social media, by an organisation or an individual. In this ecosystem, the ultimate aim of any communicator is to go beyond just being visible, to being “mentally available”, easy to be remembered in a purchasing moment. This study examines the role of fictional characters such as cartoon characters, fictional figures and mascots as an effective way of communicating in this process, as they can help to make abstract organization more human and provide for emotional connection of the audience.

According to the definition of public relation (PR), it is a strategic communication process that establishes a mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its public. As the world becomes more sceptical, misinformed and “digital fatigued”, PR is no longer a sideline but at the strategic centre of corporate communication. But influencer marketing is also a \$31.2 billion industry, with brands partnering with online personalities who have a lot of trust in niche communities (projected to be that large by 2027, according to Forward Rules). One of the most important developments for 2025-2026 is the emergence of Virtual Influencers (VIs), such as Mankind Pharma's Myra Kapoor, which are AI-generated characters. These virtual ambassadors are

100% controllable and do not have the same moral problems which can cause a PR disaster for the brand (like Lance Armstrong). Character IP is a growth engine in the digital era, with VIs on average having engagement rates 3 times those of humans. This work also presents a “Mascot Bible” for PR practitioner to prevent them from falling into the “Uncanny Valley” and offers empirical evidence that an owned mascot can lead to a 34.1% higher profit gain over the long-term than a non-character campaign. In an academic sense, it connects the dots between neuroscientific findings and useful metrics in PR such as Share of Voice (SOV) and Sentiment Analysis.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Influence of Cartoon Character Advertising on Fruit and Vegetable Preferences of 9- to 11-Year-Old Children

Bezbaruah and Brunt examined the extent to which a character-driven marketing approach can be applied to the dietary choices of older children aged 9 to 11. This cross-sectional study involved 218 third- and fourth-grade children who were asked to rank seven factors influencing their intake of fruits and vegetables. The results indicated a meaningful order in the consumer decision-making process, emphasizing sensory and functional properties over promotional images. Participants listed "taste" as the main reason they ate food, followed by "nutritional value." Surprisingly, the presence of a cartoon character on the label was one of the least important factors, ranking sixth out of the seven factors measured. The study also indicated that these preferences did not vary by gender, showing no significant differences between how boys and girls ranked the impact of brand characters.

This study offers a powerful message for public relations professionals and health advocates. Bezbaruah and Brunt argued that younger children, who have less cognitive ability to detect persuasive intent, are much more responsive to mascot appeal and fictional characters. In contrast, older children begin to take into account the functionality of objects and the quality of products. This means that a product needs to be a "taste and quality match" to satisfy this older demographic; the emotional anchor of a character alone is not enough to overcome an older child's

developed sense of taste and quality (Bezbaruah & Brunt, 2012).

The Influence of Entertainment and Brand Characters on Children's Object Preferences and Monetary Judgments

Williams-Gant, Harden, and Corriveau (2024) examined how entertainment and brand characters are associated with the object preferences and monetary judgments of four- and five-year-old children, identifying the subtle boundaries of character influence. This study drew on selective trust tasks and monetary assessments to see whether young consumers choose to prioritize object quality over character appeal. The findings revealed that children had a high degree of parasocial relationships with both brand and entertainment characters, but that emotional attachment did not always affect their trust or financial evaluations (Williams-Gant et al., 2024).

In particular, there was no greater degree of trust in recognized marketing characters than in unrecognized characters when children sought new information or evaluated endorsements. Most importantly, when asked to assess the value of objects, children deemed undamaged objects more valuable than damaged objects, even when the latter featured a familiar and beloved character (Williams-Gant et al., 2024). This result indicates that, even at a developmentally early age, children can distinguish between contextual information (e.g., a physical defect) and aesthetic information (e.g., a mascot's attractiveness) when making value judgments.

The conclusions of Williams-Gant et al. (2024) offer an important strategic lesson for public relations practitioners: character marketing does not universally supersede product quality. Children switch from affective processing to functional evaluation when they make practical or monetary choices. Thus, the long-term effectiveness of character-based PR is contingent on the character's tie to a product that is of acceptable quality and usefulness (Williams-Gant et al., 2024).

The Impact of Characters Like Tony the Tiger and Other Child-Targeted Techniques Used in Food and Beverage Marketing

A study by Mulligan, Remedios, and Ramsay (2023) offered a critical quantitative analysis of the power of particular forms of persuasive marketing, specifically comparing the effects of brand-related spokes-characters to licensed media characters. The researchers surveyed 1,341 children aged 9 to 12 from Canada online to see how various advertising techniques affected children's preferences, purchasing intent, and "pester power." The results showed that child-targeted marketing has a significantly larger overall effect on youth than marketing geared toward adults or no marketing at all (Mulligan et al., 2023).

Most importantly, the data revealed a clear hierarchy of effectiveness among character types. The average total impact (mean Likert scores) of advertisements with brand-owned characters (e.g., Tony the Tiger) was the highest (3.98), followed by licensed characters (3.80), and then control ads with no characters (3.19) (Mulligan et al., 2023). This implies that a custom character designed to represent a brand's unique voice can have an even greater long-term impact on consumer behaviour than a rented icon from popular entertainment.

These findings were consistent across various outcome measures, with children who saw ads with character-based approaches reporting significantly higher scores for food preferences and purchase intent (Mulligan et al., 2023). This study highlights the tremendous strategic value of "owned" mascots as powerful assets for PR and marketing professionals. However, because of the heavy persuasive force of these characters especially when selling low-nutrition products, the researchers emphasized that wide-ranging marketing restrictions are urgently needed to shield vulnerable youth (Mulligan et al., 2023).

Effectiveness of Animated Spokes-Character in Advertising Targeted to Kids

The study by Shuja critically examined the effectiveness of animated spokes-characters within a quantitative framework for children's advertising. The authors used a causal research design to evaluate how a child's liking of a character influences core brand metrics among pre-primary school children in Karachi, Pakistan. A methodological strength of this study was the use of Classification and Regression Tree (CART) analysis, which allowed the researchers

to precisely quantify the character's impact (Shuja et al., 2018).

The results demonstrated that the emotional appeal of an animated character serves as a primary driver of youth consumer behaviour. The data established a statistically significant influence on three major areas: product-brand character association, brand preference, and product/brand recognition rooted in the child's fondness for the character (Shuja et al., 2018). The CART model showed that product recognition linked to an appealing character was exceptionally high, with 86.7% of the sample successfully identifying products paired with attractive mascots.

The work of Shuja et al. (2018) is highly valuable for public relations and brand managers seeking strategic direction. It argues that a mascot's "likability factor" is not just a superficial aesthetic choice, but a functional tool that builds mental availability and trust in young minds. The researchers suggested that businesses invest in creating memorable, approachable characters through advertisements or mini-movies to foster long-term emotional connections with children (Shuja et al., 2018). This visual connection makes brand messages highly accessible to a young audience that cannot yet read fluently, keeping the brand top-of-mind in retail environments (Shuja et al., 2018).

An Accountability Evaluation for the Industry's Responsible Use of Brand Mascots and Licensed Media Characters to Market a Healthy Diet to American Children

Kraak and Story (2015) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of industry accountability regarding the strategic use of brand mascots and licensed media characters in food and beverage marketing. Their research identified a significant "accountability gap" in how corporate entities deploy these fictional figures to reach vulnerable demographics. A central finding was the pervasive influence and high recognition of popular media characters among children aged 2 to 11, with recognition rates for iconic figures routinely falling between 60% and 90% (Kraak & Story, 2015).

The study made a clear distinction between "brand-equity mascots" owned specifically by a product (e.g., Tony the Tiger) and "licensed media characters" borrowed from entertainment media (e.g., SpongeBob SquarePants) rented to build short-term brand

awareness (Kraak & Story, 2015). The authors argued that these characters facilitate "associative conditioning," allowing children to form powerful, one-sided emotional bonds or parasocial relationships with commercial brands. This psychological mechanism is uniquely effective on younger children who lack the cognitive literacy required to filter out persuasive marketing intent (Kraak & Story, 2015). Crucially, the review noted that while characters *can* be used to promote healthy options, they are far more frequently and effectively used to market energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods that contribute to unhealthy weight gain (Kraak & Story, 2015).

Ultimately, Kraak and Story (2015) advocate for a standardized, theory-grounded accountability framework to guide public relations and marketing practices. They suggested that to support healthy food environments, companies must prioritize ethical leadership and intentionally restrict the use of beloved fictional figures exclusively to the promotion of nutritious products by Kraak and Story (2015)

Examining the Effects of Brand and Licensed Characters on Parents' Perceptions of Children's Breakfast Cereals

Ruggles et al. (2024) conducted research examining the impact of brand and licensed characters on breakfast cereal packaging from the perspective of parents, the ultimate household "gatekeepers." While previous literature focuses heavily on how easily children are influenced, this study investigated whether these characters sway parent purchasing decisions through an online experiment with 1,013 parents of children aged 2 to 12.

The results indicated that, in general, the presence of characters does not significantly affect parents' purchase intentions ($p = .91$), healthfulness perceptions ($p = .52$), or assessments of a product's appeal to children ($p = .59$). This proves that character-based strategies in the cereal industry operate primarily direct-to-child rather than direct-to-parent. This finding is highly significant for public relations and brand managers, demonstrating a clear undercurrent of scepticism toward character marketing among specific consumer segments. While mascots remain vital for generating "pester power" among children, they can act as a deterrent for highly educated

parents who view them as visual indicators of low nutritional value. Consequently, effective child-health PR tactics must engage children while remaining transparent, clear, and evidence-backed to satisfy parental standards (Ruggles et al., 2024).

Influence of Cartoon Media Characters on Children's Attention to and Preference for Food and Beverage Products

Ogle, Graham, Lucas-Thompson, and Roberto (2017) used sophisticated eye-tracking equipment to offer empirical, objectively measured proof of how licensed media characters affect children's visual attention and subsequent food preferences. This experiment precisely measured the percentage of fixations and the exact dwell time that children aged 6 to 9 spent looking at pairs of healthier versus less-healthy food products.

The results strongly supported the hypothesis that a character plays an anchoring role in capturing consumer attention. Children looked at packages with characters at least once more than those without characters (93.4% vs. 88.8%) and spent a significantly longer total amount of time focused on them. Specifically, children spent an average of 829.7 milliseconds looking at products featuring characters compared to 717.5 milliseconds for products without characters (Ogle et al., 2017). Ogle et al. (2017) provided an important quantitative definition of "mental availability" for public relations practitioners, demonstrating that character-driven PR is not just about abstract brand recognition, but about physically grabbing attention in a crowded retail environment. However, the ethical issue remains that this attention-grabbing power is most effective when paired with unhealthy products, meaning practitioners must intentionally pivot toward healthy character-led communication strategies to foster better childhood environments (Ogle et al., 2017).

Examining Children's Perceptions of AI-Enabled Interactive Media Characters

Xu et al. (2024) explored the psychological and educational effects of interactive characters powered by Artificial Intelligence on young children. This study marks a major step forward in the evolution of character-driven communications, moving beyond static animation toward characters capable of responsive dialogic interaction and real-time feedback. Collaborating with PBS KIDS, the

researchers created science-focused videos with different conditions: standard broadcast versions, pseudo-interactive versions featuring generic pre-recorded feedback, and AI-enabled interactive versions. The findings demonstrated that children who interacted with the AI-generated characters scored significantly higher on science post-tests than those in the broadcast or pseudo-interactive groups (Xu et al., 2024).

The results showed that an AI character's responsiveness had a positive impact on both the quantity and quality of a child's verbalizations during the media experience. Additionally, children reported a sense of agency over the AI agents, and their responses suggested they felt safe, trusted the agents, and considered them to be friends (Xu et al., 2024). These findings imply that when characters mimic social reciprocity, the formation of parasocial relationships is heavily reinforced, which serves as a key element in long-term brand loyalty.

However, the researchers cautioned that as the line between AI and human interaction becomes increasingly blurred, practitioners must take measures to safeguard children from the potential misuse of highly persuasive messaging (Xu et al., 2024).

Brand Expansion for an Original IP Through Collaboration: A Case Study of Disney's Animated Film *Wish*

Lee and Kim (2025) examined how cross-industry collaborations with high-salience cultural icons can promote the brand expansion of original intellectual property (IP). The study focused on the strategic challenge of building awareness for a new, standalone Disney production, *Wish* (2023), which lacked an existing franchise audience. In contrast to previous standalone films like *Strange World* (2022) that struggled commercially, Disney tapped into K-pop culture by partnering with A Yujin of the girl group IVE to perform the promotional music video for the theme song "This Wish."

Using structural equation modelling, the researchers evaluated the effect of this cross-cultural collaboration on consumer diffusion. The findings revealed that the K-pop partnership directly enhanced brand expansion metrics, specifically inflating audience awareness, positive attitudes, and brand intentions (Lee and Kim,

2025). From a public relations standpoint, Lee and Kim (2025) emphasized the potential of converging global storytelling IPs with the participatory networks of modern fandom. This synergy creates a hybrid cultural model that promotes cross-border recognition. In the contemporary landscape, such partnerships are vital instruments for generating mental availability and anchoring a brand within a saturated global marketplace by Lee and Kim (2025).

A Systematic Review of the Adolescent-Directed Marketing Strategies of Transnational Fast-Food Companies in Low- and Middle-Income Countries
Bankole, Harris, Rutherford, and Wiseman (2023) carried out a systematic review of the marketing strategies deployed by transnational fast-food corporations (TFFCs) targeting adolescents in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). By synthesizing findings from 12 primary research articles, the authors revealed an industry-wide transition away from saturated, high-income markets toward developing nations where advertising regulations are often weaker. They determined that premium offers, product appeal, brand recognition, and promotional characters were the most pervasive strategies used to capture youth attention (Bankole et al., 2023).

A major conclusion of the study is that digital social media networks serve as the primary conduits for these incentive- and character-based campaigns. Bankole et al. (2023) suggested that fast-food marketing to adolescents in LMICs is a highly context-specific phenomenon, with execution styles varying across cultural and socioeconomic lines. The review underscored that TFFCs leverage the persuasive power of brand characters and digital engagement to establish lifelong consumption patterns during a developmental period when adolescents are uniquely vulnerable to emotional appeals (Bankole et al., 2023).

This study serves as a crucial ethical and regulatory reminder for public relations professionals. It demonstrates that while promotional characters are essential for building brand awareness in emerging markets, they face severe scrutiny as public health threats when used to market low-nutrient, energy-dense foods. Long-term PR campaigns must respect these local cultural nuances while remaining

responsive to the growing global demand for stricter marketing regulations targeting vulnerable youth populations (Bankole et al., 2023).

Research Gap

While existing research confirms that cartoon characters and mascots are potent tools for building initial brand awareness and recall, a significant "Direct Comparative Scarcity" exists between different types of character assets. Current scholarship often evaluates brand-owned mascots (e.g., Tony the Tiger) and licensed media characters (e.g., Disney or Shinchan) in isolation, resulting in a lack of head-to-head experimental studies that determine which is more effective at fostering long-term trust versus generating a temporary sales spike. This creates a "Strategic Tension in Mascot Lifecycles," where organizations lack a clear rulebook for modernizing legacy icons, as seen with the Air India Maharaja, without succumbing to "woke blandness" or erasing the playful spirit that made the icon popular in the first place.

A second critical gap involves the "Contextual and Technological Frontier" of character-driven PR, particularly within emerging markets like India. This contextual gap is compounded by the rapid "Technological Integration" of 3D AI-powered virtual influencers. Current literature provides very little insight into the "Uncanny Valley Effect", the feeling of unease when a character looks "almost human" but acts like a robot, and how a consumer's "digital literacy" serves as a moderating factor in trusting these new digital agents. Addressing these missing elements is essential for understanding how brands can balance heritage with innovation while navigating the high-engagement landscape of 2026.

Theoretical Framework

To address the identified gaps and provide a scientific foundation for analysing our findings, this research utilizes a "toolbox" of theories that explain the psychological and semiotic pathways of character influence:

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Relationship (PSR) Theory: First introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), Parasocial Interaction (PSI) refers to the psychological, one-sided experiences that media users have during exposure to media figures, which the audience experiences as a face-to-face conversational

relationship. Over time, these brief interactions develop into long-term Parasocial Relationships (PSRs), which explain why consumers feel like fictional characters or media personas are personal friends (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This "illusion of friendship" is a vital driver of public relations success. Consumers are statistically more likely to accept a recommendation or persuasive message from a parasocial "friend" or a role model they feel they know intimately than from a standard, detached corporate advertisement.

McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model (MTM): Proposed by McCracken (1986, 1989), this model functions like a symbolic bridge that illustrates how cultural meaning moves from the socially constructed world to consumer goods through a highly structured three-stage process. In the first stage, meaning resides in the culturally constituted world, deeply embedded in shared symbols such as social status, fun, nostalgia, or bravery (McCracken, 1986). In the second stage, marketing communications and advertising act as a conduit, transferring Finally, in the third stage, the consumer purchases and consumes the product to possess and integrate those specific traits into their own self-concept and daily lifestyle rituals (McCracken, 1989). In the context of this study, the model explains how a beloved character (e.g., Shinchan or Doraemon) carries pre-established cultural meanings of mischief, fun, or childhood wonder.

Jungian Brand Archetypes: Based on the foundational psychological theories of Jung (1959), this framework identifies universal, instinctual "personality patterns" that reside within the collective unconscious of all human beings, crossing geographical and cultural boundaries. An archetype is not a specific character itself, but rather a cross-cultural pattern of behavioural traits, motivations, and perceptions that individuals naturally recognize and project onto external figures (Jung, 1959). In contemporary brand management and public relations, this psychological concept was translated into a strategic framework by Mark and Pearson (2001), who mapped out 12 distinct brand archetypes. For instance, the "Jester" archetype (e.g., the Geico Gecko or M&M's characters) aims to bring instant joy, irreverence, and laughter to the world, while the "Caregiver" archetype (e.g., Johnson &

Johnson or Campbell's Soup figures) exudes compassion, nurturing, and a core desire to make others feel safe (Mark & Pearson, 2001).

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative research design with a causal-comparative and correlational approach. It employs a quantitative research design with a causal-comparative and correlational approach. The objective is to determine the impact of the Independent Variable (Use of cartoon characters and mascots) on the Dependent Variable (Audience Connection and Brand Loyalty) while considering mediating and moderating factors, accounting for mediating and moderating factors.

Sampling

The study uses a multi-stage sampling technique to ensure representation across various audience segments:

Primary Demographic: Children Parents, as well as Gen-Z consumers (ages 18-26) who are primary targets for nostalgic and digital-first campaigns.

Sampling Method: Convenience and Purposive Sampling will be used for primary data collection via educational institutions and social media platforms.

Sample Size: A Total of 133 respondents were recorded in order to obtain sufficient statistical power for mediation analysis. target of 133 respondents to achieve sufficient statistical power for mediation analysis.

Quantitative survey

Data was collected using structured online questionnaires. Survey Quantitative

The survey employed Likert Scales (5 points or 7 points): to measure consumer attitudes, purchase intention and emotional connection.

Research Objectives

The methodology is structured to address the following core objectives:

1. To understand how companies strategically employ cartoon characters and mascots in PR to attract attention.
2. To examine how brands use collaborations with popular characters to engage wider younger audiences.
3. To assess how exposure to characters affects consumer attitudes and decision-making.

Operational Definitions

Brand Mascots

Any character (human, animal, or object) that is designed or utilized by a company to embody its core ideals, personality traits, and corporate image (Gaikwad, n.d.). In this study, brand mascots are operationally measured through respondent recognition and recall scores when exposed to specific campaign visual stimuli (e.g., the Amul Girl or the Geico Gecko) to assess cognitive baseline awareness (Bereza, n.d.).

Fictional Figures

Any animated, costume-based, or computer-generated (CG) entity created to facilitate direct, interactive communication between a brand and its target market (Cheon, 2022). They are operationally categorized into two distinct types:

Brand Perception

The holistic configuration of thoughts, feelings, and mental imagery held by consumers regarding a specific corporate entity. Operationally, this variable is assessed using 5-point Likert and Semantic Differential scales (Pham, 2026). These scales evaluate post-exposure consumer reactions to character stimuli across three foundational dimensions: *trustworthiness*, *innovation*, and *visual appeal*.

IV. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Data Analysis

The researcher received 133 responses via a google forms survey. This data was systematically analysed to the research objectives. The quantitative responses were primarily recorded on a Likert Scale (1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neutral, 4: Agree and 5: Strongly Agree) and subjected to statistical analysis to identify grounds of commonality, identification of

patterns and the consumers perception of animated character and mascot collaborations influencing the brand's identity and positioning.

4.1 Demographic Profile

Age of the Respondents

The age distribution of the survey respondents reveals a majority of the participants of this survey fall under the age range of 23 to 27 years accounting for 43.61% (n=58) of the respondents. Suggesting that close to half of the respondents are young adults, a demographic that is generally highly active on social media and come across Animated Characters and Mascots endorsed advertisements. Followed by a notable portion of the respondents falling under the age ranges of 18 to 22 and 28 to 32 with 18.8% (n=25) and 21.05 (n=28) respectively. Additionally, only 3.76% (n=5) and 3.01% (n=4) of the respondents fell under the age distributions of 38 to 42 and 43 and above respectively.

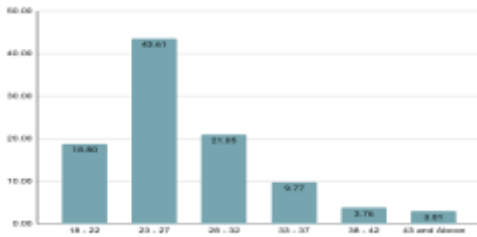


Figure 1: Graph on Age of the Respondents

4.1.2 Social Media Habits

From the survey responses it is clear that the use of social media with 93.23% (n=124) respondents prefer being highly active users of social media where most ads that brands feature in a digital age use. The high user percentage of social media may also indicate the high consumption of advertisements that feature animated characters and mascots. While the remaining minority of the respondents such as Streaming platforms and television shared a 2.26% (n=3) of the respondents and 1.5% (n=2) use Online News websites as well 0.75% (n=1) prefer reading a newspaper.

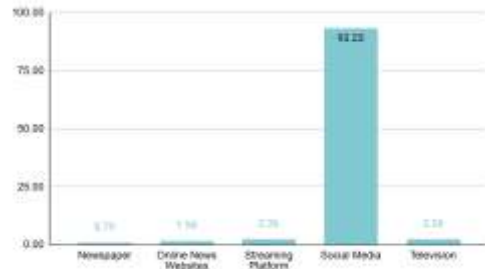


Figure 2: Graph on social media habits of the Respondents

4.1.3 Attention-Grabbing of Fictional Characters

The questionnaire was designed to test whether the respondents did find Fictional Character and Mascots attractive in order to determine whether Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Relationship (PSR) Theory holds well with the demographic of the respondents. From the graph figure 9 it is clearly visible that a majority of the respondents 64.66% (n=86) and 15.79% (n=21) of the survey agree and strongly agree that they are attracted to cartoon characters, Fictional Characters and Mascots when it comes to public relation campaigns. While a significant number of respondents, 17.29% (n=23) to a certain level do agree with the statement. But, clearly a minority i.e. 2.26% (n=3) disagree with the statement. This analysis clearly indicates, characters are seen as "friends" even though they aren't real.

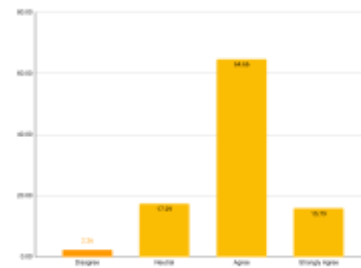


Figure 3: Graph on attention-grabbing of fictional characters of the Respondents

4.1.4 Brand Appeal Through Fictional Characters

For brands that use fictional figures, cartoon characters and mascots in their PR campaigns mainly rely on the relatability and easier connectivity to the audience in order to make brand recall and brand connectivity easier and the campaign more

memorable. The Parasocial theory and Relationship theory is a testament of this phenomenon and this is clearly seen from the graph figure 10 as a majority of the respondents 91.6% $[n=122]$ (21.8% $[n=29]$ + 54.14% $[n=72]$ +15.79% $[n=21]$) reaffirmed the statement “I find brands more appealing when they use cartoon characters or fictional figures in their PR strategies.”



Figure 4: Graph on brand appeal through fictional characters of the Respondents

4.1.5 Visual Engagement Through Cartoon Characters

From the graph it can clearly be concluded from the analysis of the current study, as a majority of the respondents

92.48% $(n=123)$ [16.54% $(n=22)$ +59.4% $(n=79)$ +16.54% (133)] agree with the statement that phrases the increased viewability of the PR campaign in terms of attractiveness. Meanwhile, the minority of the study, 6.77% $(n=9)$ and a negligible 0.75% $(n=1)$ disagree and strongly disagree with the given proclamation that “The presence of cartoon characters makes PR strategies more visually engaging”.

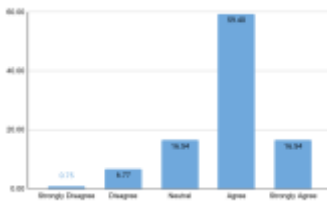


Figure 5: Graph on visual engagement through cartoon characters of the Respondents

4.1.6 Higher Recall of Fictional Character Campaigns

Focusing on brand recall, an important aspect for any public relations campaign, the need to make the campaigns indelible is an imperative. Resulting in the brands having to choose fictional characters not only to make an impact but also, relating to the Parasocial Interaction and Relationship theory, make it relatable for the audience and having a friendly medium is a requisite for any brand collaboration. This can be observed from the analysis of the survey, as a commanding majority 90.97% $(n=121)$ [21.8% $(n=29)$ + 52.63% $(n=70)$ + 16.54% $(n=22)$] do agree with the quoted statement of “I can recall PR campaigns featuring fictional characters more easily than those without them.” While a small minority, 7.52% $(n=10)$ and 1.5% $(n=2)$ disagree and strongly disagree with the same. This can help us conclude that a PR campaign featuring fictional characters is indeed effective and makes a strong case when it comes to helping with brand recall.

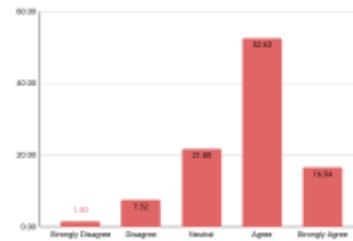


Figure 6: Graph on higher recall of fictional character campaigns of the Respondents

4.1.7 Fictional Characters Increase Brand Interest

The results show that the use of fictional characters definitely inspires the initial curiosity of the respondents to delve deeper into a brand or product. Sixty percent of the audience $(n = 81)$ agreed with the statement, with 15 percent strongly agreeing $(n = 20)$, indicating that cartoon characters, mascots and fictional figures are very good at grabbing people's attention and making them want to know more about a brand. The findings clearly suggest that fictional character-based PR campaigns are becoming more and more relevant when it comes to making great first impressions and fostering consumer interaction.

But 18.05% $(n = 24)$ were undecided, perhaps because they don't have a strong mental link between the fictional image and a newfound interest in brands or products. The negative perception toward the use of

fictional characters in PR campaigns was very low: 5.26% (n = 7) disagreed and 0.75% (n = 1) strongly disagreed.

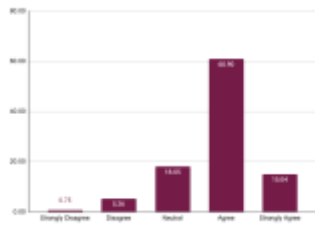


Figure 7: Graph on fictional characters increase brand interest of the Respondents

4.1.8 Fictional Character Collaborations Attract Youth

The results show that there is a clear sense among the participants that fictional characters are effective in capturing the younger audience when collaborating on PR efforts. Fictional figures and mascots can be good PR tools (54.89% agree, 27.07% strongly agree). The characters will contribute to the emotional appeal in the brand and deeper audience resonances, particularly with younger audiences. By contrast, 5.26% (n = 7) disagreed and 1.50% (n = 2) strongly disagreed with the statement, with 11.28% (n = 15) being neutral, indicating that most respondents are aware of how effective these collaborations can be.

This finding has a close relationship with Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Theory, which states that viewers develop emotional relationships with fictional characters who are not considered real. Audiences need only be familiar with and trust popular characters such as Harry Potter, and may extend that familiarity and trust to associated brands.

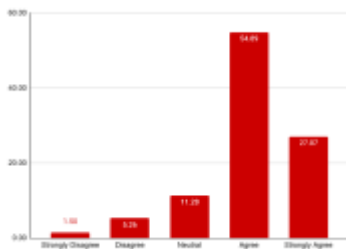


Figure 8: Graph on fictional characters increase brand interest of the Respondents

4.1.9 Popular Characters Increase Audience Engagement

The results show that the respondents have a high level of awareness that the use of popular fictional characters such as Doraemon can be used to make brand PR more engaging. The majority of the audience (58.65%, n = 78) agreed with the statement and 21.80% (n = 29) strongly agreed, indicating that audiences believe cartoon characters and mascots are good means of grabbing attention and generating emotional interest. The findings reveal a trend toward increasingly expanding the use of fictional characters in PR efforts, particularly for brands targeting younger and more diverse audiences. Contrary to this, 14.29% (n = 19) did not express any negative perception of such collaborations, and only 5.26% (n = 7) disagreed, indicating that very little negative perception existed regarding such collaborations.

The results are highly related to McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model (MTM), which describes the way cultural meanings of characters are transferred to the brand.



Figure 9: Graph on Popular Characters Increase Audience Engagement of the Respondents

4.1.10 Fictional Characters Appeal to Families and Children

The results also showed that respondents felt that PR campaigns featuring fictional characters like Motu Patlu makes the brand more appealing to children and families in the collaborations with food brands. Sixty-one percent (n = 80) agreed and 21 percent (n = 28) strongly agreed that fictional characters were extremely effective in capturing family-consumers and having an impact on emotion, suggesting audiences are very receptive to fictional characters as a means to reach family consumers as well as to create an emotional connection. From these findings, it is concluded that cartoon characters are able to build familiarity, entertainment and trust and subsequently

increase the engagement and memory of brands to younger consumers.

At the same time, 12.78% (n = 17) were neutral, indicating that some respondents do not strongly perceive fictional characters in terms of its brand impact. The overall percentage of those who did not agree or strongly disagree was low (5.26%, n = 7 and 0.75%, n = 1, respectively), indicating low negative perceptions regarding such PR collaborations.

The results were significantly related to Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) theory that is used to describe the development of emotional relationships between an audience and a fictional character through the course of time. Young children and families will see the characters as trusted and familiar, and therefore more likely to be receptive to the associated brand messages.

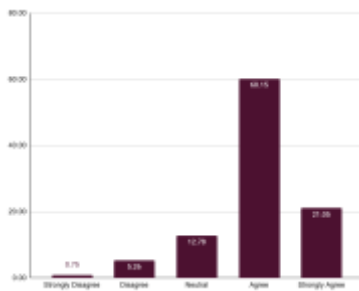


Figure 10: Graph on Fictional Characters Appeal to Families and Children of the Respondents

4.1.11 Brand Mascots Strengthen Recall and Interest

Enhance emotional and audience engagement, while boosting positive brand perception. The results indicate that the respondents hold a high opinion of the effectiveness of the PR campaign featuring a fictional character, such as Motu Patlu, in partnership with a food brand and the belief that this approach makes the food brands more attractive to children and the families. The statement was overwhelmingly agreed by a majority (53.28%, n = 71) with 30.83% (n = 41) strongly agreeing, indicating a strong positive attitude towards the use of cartoon characters in public relations campaigns. These findings indicate that fictional characters contribute to the emotional appeal, familiarity and engagement with audiences, particularly younger and family-oriented audiences.

At the other end of the spectrum, 11.28% (n = 15) were neither positive nor negative in their association, meaning that some consumers may not have a strong link between fictional character collaborations and greater brand appeal. There was little agreement that these strategies were not a problem with only 4.51% (n = 6) disagreeing and none strongly disagreeing. The results are closely aligned with the Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Theory.

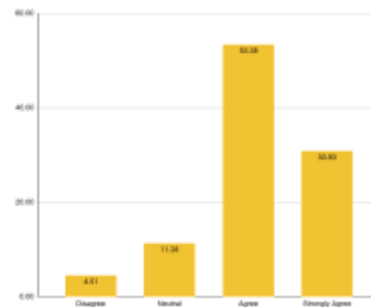


Figure 11: Graph on Brand Mascots Strengthen Recall and Interest of the Respondents

4.1.12 Fictional Collaborations Engage Wider Youth Audiences

The results suggest that there is a high perception among the respondents that fictional characters work well to attract larger and younger audiences through a collaborative PR campaign, like the Shinchan partnership with Crocs. The majority of respondents (53.38% or n = 71) agreed to the statement, and 27.82% (n = 37) strongly agreed, indicating that audiences feel fictional character collaboration is an effective way to improve brand awareness and engagement. The results indicate that cartoon characters and mascots are exciting, relatable and emotional, enhancing the popularity of brands amongst the younger generation.

Meanwhile, 12.03% (n = 16) were undecided, suggesting that some might not strongly feel that fictional character collaborations have had a big impact on audience engagement. Minimal negative perception towards such PR campaigns, only 6.02% (n = 8) disagreed and 0.75% (n = 1) strongly disagreed.

The results of this research are quite related to the McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model (MTM)

regarding the transfer of cultural meanings associated with fictional characters to the brand. Characters such as Shinchan represent humour, playfulness and youthfulness which are then associated with the collaborating brand, which adds to its app

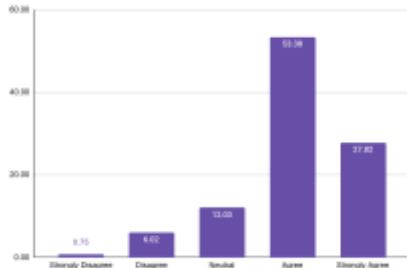


Figure 12: Graph on Fictional Collaborations Engage Wider Youth Audiences of the Respondents

4.1.13 Fictional Characters Create Higher Engagement

The results indicate that the respondents showed a higher level of preference for the PR campaigns with fictional characters (Motu Patlu) than campaigns with real human beings. Most of the respondents (77.44%, n = 103) answered “yes,” meaning that audiences are more engaged and emotionally moved by fictional characters in public relations campaigns. Only 22.56% (n = 30) preferred campaigns with fictional people, indicating that fictional people have more power in capturing the attention and interest of the audience.

This result is highly related to Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Theory, which is a theory about the emotional bonding that occurs in one direction between audience and fictional characters over time. Familiar characters such as Motu Patlu can induce emotions of familiarity, comfort, and entertainment, which can help to better engage the audience and bring the brand's message to life. As a result of this emotional bond, audiences are more engaged in the message and more effective PR communication is achieved.

The findings also support the theory of self-congruity, as viewers, particularly the younger ones, are more inclined to connect with characters that represent their playful, fun-loving, imaginative selves.

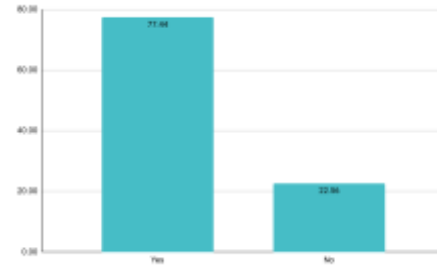


Figure 13: Graph on Fictional Characters Create Higher Engagement of the Respondents

4.1.14 Cartoon Character Collaborations Feel More Relatable

The results reveal that respondents tend to feel more connected and more impactful to PR collaborations involving cartoon characters such as Motu Patlu than to traditional human collaborations. The majority of respondents (54.14%, n = 72) agreed with the statement, and 13.53% (n = 18) strongly agreed, indicating fictional characters as effective means to make stronger emotional connection and audience involvement. These results highlight the growing influence of cartoon characters and mascots in shaping positive brand perception and increasing relatability among consumers.

Meanwhile, 22.56% (n = 30) stayed neutral, suggesting that some may not see a great distinction between fictional and human collaborations. A relatively low proportion disagreed (8.27%, n=11) and strongly disagreed (1.50%, n = 2) about fictional character collaborations, suggesting low negative perception of fictional character collaborations.

These results are strongly related to the Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Theory that describes the psychological process of the audience forming emotional bonds and familiarity with fictional characters over time.

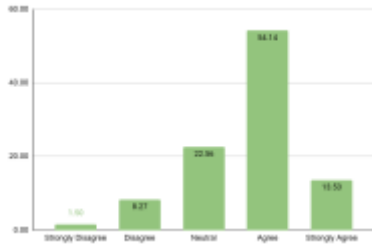


Figure 14: Graph on Cartoon Character Collaborations Feel More Relatable of the Respondents

4.1.15 Fictional Characters Build Stronger Emotional Connections

The results show that participants believe that PR campaigns with Motu Patlu have a higher emotional impact than those with real people. Mostly (56.39%, n = 75) agreed with the statement, and 18.05% (n = 24) strongly agreed that fictional characters are effective in generating emotional engagement and audience attachment. The findings indicate that cartoon characters and mascots can establish familiarity, comfort and entertainment, thus increasing the emotional appeal of PR initiatives.

At the same time, 18.80% (n = 25) were neutral, some may not strongly distinguish between fictional and human collaborations in terms of emotional impact. Few individuals expressed negative perceptions of fictional character-based campaigns – only 6.02% (n = 8) disagreed, and 0.75% (n = 1) strongly disagreed.

The results of this study are strongly related to the theory of Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR), where the audience can form emotional bonds and feelings of friendship with fictional characters over the passage of time. Characters such as Motu Patlu can create emotion and feelings of trust, nostalgia and fun for their audience, which makes them more emotional in the brand messages they have to offer.

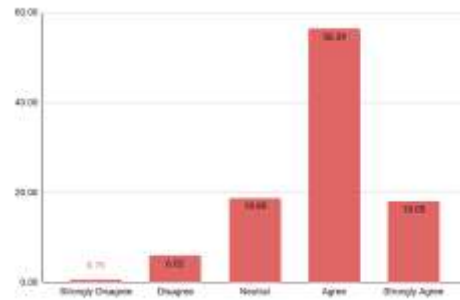


Figure 15: Graph on Fictional Characters Build Stronger Emotional Connections of the Respondents

4.1.16 Fictional Characters Improve Brand Recall

The results show that the respondents are more likely to recall the brands which were promoted by the Motu Patlu than by the real-life human beings. 52.63% (n = 70) agreed with the statement and 20.30% (n = 27) strongly agreed, indicating fictional characters are proven to be very effective in creating brand recall and audience memory. These findings illustrate that cartoon figures and mascots can produce memorable, emotional PR campaigns that stick in consumers' heads for a greater length of time.

Meanwhile, 18.05% (n = 24) were not strongly identified with fictional character promotions and improved brand remembrance, suggesting that some may not have a strong connection between fictional character promotions and improved brand remembrance. Limited negative perception of fictional character campaigns is shown by only 9.02% (n = 12) disagreeing, with no one strongly disagreeing.

These findings are strongly related to the work of McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) which suggests that symbolic meanings that are assigned to fictional characters are transferred to the brand. The characters such as Motu Patlu, represent some fun, entertainment and familiarity with the brand, which makes it more memorable and emotionally appealing. The findings also corroborate Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Theory, which suggests that audiences form emotional connections with fictional characters over the course of time.

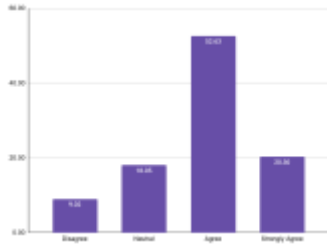


Fig 22: Graph on Fictional Characters Improve Brand Recall of the Respondents

V. Findings

The main research aim of this study was to assess the strategic value of cartoon characters, mascots and fictional characters as anchors in PR and brand communications. This research combined primary survey data (n=133) and a listed analysis of peer-reviewed research papers and five PR campaigns considered to be landmark. Based on the results of this investigation, the following conclusions can be made. The investigation revealed that character imagery is a great way to grab the human eye and immediately pique interest in a brand. The primary survey data was analysed quantitatively, and it was found that 75.94% of the respondents (60.90% agreed and 15.04% strongly agreed) said that using fictional characters definitely enhances their initial attraction to a brand. Physiological research with eye-tracking technology reveals that, for children and young adults, character-branded packaging gets 93.4% of the time's attention, while plain packaging gets 88.8%. As a result, digital PR websites with mascots have an average engagement score of 52%, reinforcing their value as critical "visual anchors" in a saturated media landscape. One of the most important results of this research is the role characters play in the creation of the long-term brand memory. The study results revealed the most significant brand recognition factor was character likability, with 86.7% of the respondents correctly identifying and linking the brand to the character due to their positive emotional connection. This research employed a "toolbox" of three important theories for analysing the results:

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Theory: "friendship illusion" theory in which the consumer feels as if the character(s) are their friend, despite the fact that they are not. This is crucial to PR because the human

tendency is to believe in a recommendation from a "friend" over an advertisement by the company.

McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model (MTM): It is like a "bridge" that demonstrates that the meaning of a trait is transferred through three stages: first, from the culture to the character (as in the case of fun and bravery); second, from the character to the product (as in the case of fun and bravery becoming a part of the product); and third, from the product to the consumer (as in the case of the consumer buying the product to make the traits his/her own).

Jungian Brand Archetypes: This theory outlines 12 universal "personality patterns" (such as The Jester, who brings laughter or The Caregiver, who offers protection). These patterns help ensure that brands such as Shinchan x Crocs or Motu Patlu x Cure foods have their mascots understood in various cultures. High salience cultural collaborations such as Disney x K-pop and Gucci x Doraemon can serve as growth engines, as illustrated by case studies. These campaigns inspire "participatory diffusion," as engagement and fan-generated video and content is the main method of brand growth. Campaign 3 - Motu Patlu x Curefoods proved highly successful to give a TV IP the transformation of a "culinary integrated experience" for families in major Indian cities.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate that cartoon figures, fictional characters and brand mascots are not simply tools that decorate the image of the advertisement, but are important "anthropological buffers" which are pivotal in a facilitating role between the abstract world of the corporate sender and the human world of the consumer receiver. The figures overcome the psychological gap between people and products by giving them human-like attributes, and create a level of trust and emotional connection that a corporate logo can't achieve. As this study has shown, as the global marketplace is moving towards 2026, the main challenge for PR is to get the brand to be "mental available", the ease with which it is recalled during a purchase decision and character-driven PR is the most powerful strategic tool for building the required memory structures to make this happen. The results of this study are very strong evidence of the approach

in which theories are used to examine character-led communication, known as the “toolbox.” The huge success of characters such as the Amul Girl and the Salesforce cast validates the validity of Anthropomorphism Theory which suggests that the human brain, in particular the amygdala, is hard-wired to process human-like brand figures the same way as it processes real human faces. This biological synergy produces the feeling of “social presence”, which makes the buyer easily connect with the brand.

In addition, the study shows that Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) play the most significant psychological mediation to turn the consumer's attention from initial awareness to long-term loyalty. Owning a “friendly mascot” can help a brand avoid the usual scepticism and “counter-arguing” that develops when making a “real” sales presentation. If a consumer feels a character is a friend or role model, they will take much greater credibility from a brand recommendation by that character, making the experience a more relational one, rather than a commercial one.

Lastly, the study confirms McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) as the necessary “bridge” that brings symbolic elements from the character to the product. From Chhota Bheem's courage to Shinchan's naughtiness, these cultural values are successfully translated to the respective product brands (POGO or Crocs), enabling consumers to imbibe these characteristics through the act of buying the brand.

The building of a “Share of Voice” (SOV) is also an important finding of this study, as it is possible for mascots to earn an enduring brand equity. Characters in campaigns achieve an 8% higher SOV and are more “talkable” in the industry. This implies that characters can be used as force multipliers for creating reach in PR that is shareable and memorable without the huge recurring budgets that would be necessary for traditional celebrity-led outreach.

The study suggests that, culturally, character-driven PR must be “glocal”, think global and speak local, with locals engaging in local folklore and social norms. In the Indian context, the time-honoured legacy of icons such as the Amul Girl has played a significant role in helping to keep this brand firmly in the national psyche for more than 50 years and retain its topicality. On the

other hand, the political twists and turns that have surrounded the modernization of the Air India Maharaja and the departure of Asian Paints' Gattu remind us that mascots have a lifespan. Keeping the “playful spirit” that made the brand so salient and iconic can be lost by trying to update a staple with “woke blandness” or generic designs. In the future, this study suggests that the next big movement in character-based PR is the shift from 2D cartoon characters to AI-driven virtual influencers and 3D avatars. The study does, however, caution of the high risk associated with the “Uncanny Valley Effect. The more the digital character looks like a real human being, the more it can instil a sense of fear and distrust if it behaves in a manner that is not consistent with the facial timing and movement it has. When the digital character looks like a real human being, even slight incongruities, like robotic facial movements and timing, can trigger fear and distrust, rather than connection. To practitioners, the crucial factor in crossing this frontier is to keep one's designs in a stylized and non-threatening fashion and to emphasize “behavioural realism” rather than “visual realism,” so that the emotional bond is maintained.

Limitations of the Study

- The main survey sample size of 133 people indicates clear trends but could have been larger compared to the massive global surveys from which conclusions are drawn, which may affect the generalizability of results to the diverse Indian population.
- Cross-Sectional Design: The study gives a “snapshot” of consumer feelings. It's not about the larger-scale change in emotional connection over the years as a child becomes an adult.
- Self-Reporting Bias: When a self-report method is used to gauge purchase intent – as is often done in online surveys, it may not always accurately predict actual buying behaviour in a complex real-world retail environment.
- Stimulus Specificity: character analysis of five specific PR campaigns gives depth, but may not cover the effectiveness of characters in high involvement B2B sectors and professional services.

Scope for Future research

- Longitudinal Loyalty Tracking: Future research should compare the "residual imagery" of mascots and repeat over a period of years the loyal consumer tracking to assess the long-term effect on lifelong brand loyalty.
- In order to understand the impact of consumer's knowledge of AI and technology (digital literacy) on their trust in AI-powered virtual brand ambassadors and their susceptibility to the "Uncanny Valley Effect", investigation is necessary.
- Cross-Cultural Direct Comparisons: The researchers should make head-to-head comparisons of different mascot models across different regions such as India's Amul girl and Japan's Yuru-Kyara to find out what are some common characteristics of the characters that make users engage.
- Neuroscientific and Hormonal Validation: Future research can design an objective biological baseline of brand trust based on character exposure, through fMRI or blood analysis of the release of the hormone "Oxytocin".

Implication of the study

- The study found that the human-like brand figures are processed by the brain, and in the same manner as a real human face, namely in the amygdala. This biological synergy gives rise to the "social presence" of the business transaction, creating the feeling of a relational business transaction.
- The results of the current study validate the Meaning Transfer Model where characters provide a "symbolic bridge" between culture and the cultural product, and then to the consumer's self-concept.
- The data supports the theory that consumers think of the brand characters as 'friends. The illusion is more effective than corporate advertising because humans are more likely to believe a referral from a friend than a company.
- A key practical implication is that mascots are better long-term investments than celebrity endorsers. You can see that your owned mascots generate a profit gain of 34.1% more than long-term campaigns and an increase of 8% in Share of Voice (SOV).

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