I'm Friends with Louie the Fly, not Mortein: Conceptualising the New Brand Relationships on Social Media

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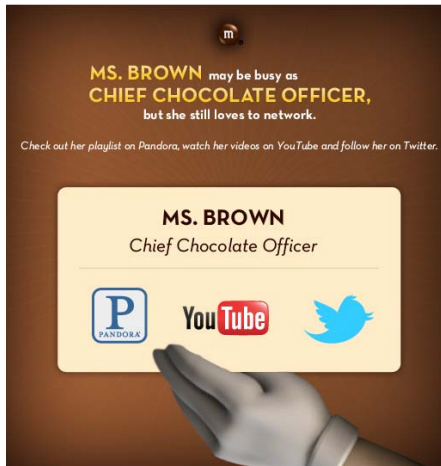**Queensland University of Technology**

Social media offers many opportunities for building brand relationships. One method of fostering relationships is to create a social media presence for the company spokes-character. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such a strategy can be very effective, though empirical research is needed. This paper reviews what is known and highlights a concern, based on analysis of the case of Louie the Fly and Mortein, that consumers may interact with characters as if they were separate to their parent brand. Hence positive associations with the character may not translate into positive brand outcomes. Following discussion, a model is proposed for testing.

INTRODUCTION

Spokes-characters are '...animated beings or objects, created to promote a product, service or idea' (Phillips 1996, p.155). They were first used in the late 1800s when they emerged as registered trademarks, but the use of spokes-characters for marketing communications has since grown, owing to their ability to remind consumers about a product, transfer positive associations to a brand, and give a corporate company a more 'personal' face (Callcott & Lee, 1995). One example is the Michelin Man, who has served as spokes-character for Michelin tyres since 1898, after starting out in print advertising.

Spokes-characters have become important brand representatives, no longer seen as simply entertaining cartoons featured in television and magazine advertisements. Corporations have now extended their use to interactive, social media platforms, where a consumer can be 'friends' with a spokes-character via Facebook, read their comments on the latest iPhone release through Twitter, and watch their family histories being documented on YouTube (see Figure 1). The interactions that consumers once had with two-dimensional spokes-characters have undergone significant transformation in the digital space. With spokes-character Facebook pages achieving significant numbers of 'likes' and interactions with consumers, one question concerns whether this strategy is creating characters that are more engaging than the brands they represent, and what impact this has on brand outcomes.

FIGURE 1
MS BROWN'S SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

INTERACTIVE SPOKES-CHARACTERS AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM

One of the great benefits of creating a social media presence for spokes-characters is that it allows characters to interact one-on-one with consumers, which can help foster relationships, particularly when anthropomorphism occurs. Based on the Theory of Mind, which describes the ability to attribute a 'mind' to someone or something (Frith & Frith, 2005), anthropomorphism is a cognitive bias exhibited by humans when they attribute human personality characteristics, free will or intentionality to non-human agents (Kwan & Fiske, 2008), such as cartoon characters. Character interactivity can trigger anthropomorphism (e.g., Kim & Sundar, 2012), leading to positive consumer responses. For instance, Phillips and Lee (2005) found that interactive spokes-characters on company websites positively increased perceived entertainment, social presence and website liking beyond what was achieved by static spokes-characters on such websites. Social media sites, however, make anthropomorphism more likely, as they facilitate not only interactivity, but also make it possible for one to see personality, free will or intentionality in a non-human agent (Kwan & Fiske, 2008). Consider for example the following tweet from Ms Green to Ms Brown of the M&M's spokes-characters, which shows personality, free will and intentionality:

"Red says he and Yellow are hanging out this weekend. @mmsbrown, you want a girls weekend?! :)"

When there is a shift from seeing brands as representations of impersonal corporations to characters full of life and personality, consumers may begin to interact with them as if they were human. A recent study conducted by LeBel and Cooke (2008) found that consumers participate in the narratives surrounding spokes-characters, by using their own imaginations to assign numbers of children or types of cars to spokes-characters they favour. Anthropomorphism can result in consumers seeing an agent (a spokes-character) as deserving of consideration and respect (Epley, Waytz & Cacioppo, 2007), leading to moral care and concern for the agent (Waytz, Cacioppo & Epley, 2010). Further, when brands are anthropomorphised, consumers may begin to emulate behaviours that they perceive as consistent with that brand personality (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Indeed, has been suggested that once a mind has been perceived in an object, the responses of an individual to this object may become just as complex as responses to another human being (Kim & McGill, 2012).

Recent research has indicated that the tendency to see characters and other non-human agents as 'real' may also be based around fulfilling social needs (Epley et al., 2008; Gardner & Knowles, 2008), which

can be well-facilitated through social interaction over the internet (e.g., Shaw & Gant, 2002) and social media channels (e.g., Ryan & Xenos, 2011). These channels require no physical contact, hence consumers may have Facebook friends that they have never met in person, and never speak to in an offline context, yet they perceive these relationships as 'real', not purely 'virtual'. Similarly, these relationships may be fostered with spokes-characters who are more humanised in the online space.

As a result of the opportunities that social media channels like Facebook and Twitter offer for relationship-building with spokes-characters, there is a lot of discussion in the practitioner literature about the positive outcomes for brands. For example, comparethemarket.com claims its market share doubled after introducing meerkat character Aleksandr Orlov and his social media presence (Costa, 2010). They attribute Aleksandr Orlov with making the company one of the most recognised in the saturated insurance market (Costa, 2010), which tends to be characterised by low consumer engagement. But beyond anecdotal evidence, scarce attention has been given to empirical research that investigates what is likely to be a complex interplay of factors between the consumer, a spokes-character and the brand.

BRAND VERSUS CHARACTER ENGAGEMENT

The digital environment broadly, and interactive social media such as Facebook and Twitter specifically, allow consumers unprecedented choice in how they 'engage' with an object; or in other words, 'the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions' (Hollebeek 2011, p.790). In the context of social media, a consumer directly interacts across cognitive, emotional and behavioural levels. But consumers may choose to interact with the parent company, the brand, the character or any combination of these. Spokes-characters can be perceived as more 'real' as a result of interactivity and anthropomorphism, which can lead to greater imaginative engagement on the part of the consumer (e.g., LeBel & Cooke, 2008), but with the character.

When reading and commenting on status updates and tweets from Ms. Brown, the latest spokes-candy for M&M's, the consumer is interacting with Ms. Brown, not Mars Inc. There is a certain suspension of disbelief that occurs, whereby comments from Facebook friends and Twitter followers are directed straight to Ms. Brown, perhaps without conscious recognition by consumers that they are engaging with a brand representative through a fictitious spokes-character, and not with a 'real' friend. The cross-over between the real and the fictitious, especially as a result of anthropomorphism, increases the complexity of the engagement that occurs. As a result, the goodwill towards a spokes-character may not always translate to goodwill towards the brand itself.

One recent example to illustrate concerns Louie the Fly. In 2011, Mortein launched a social media campaign designed to encourage consumers to vote on whether to kill or save Louie: their iconic spokes-character that was 'born' in 1957 (Reckitt Benckiser, 2011). Consumers felt betrayed, and vented their emotions on Louie the Fly's Facebook page with comments, such as:

"NO Louie = NO Customers"
"Don't care about the product just love Louie...he 'made' mortein what it is today!!!!"
"Let's start a Facebook page 'Sack the CEO of Mortien to save Louie' who agrees?"

The comments were overwhelmingly in support of Louie (and not in support of Mortein), showing consumer engagement on an emotional and behavioural level with the character, but not with the brand. In this instance, Louie the Fly and Mortein had become separate entities in consumers' minds.

After being saved in early 2012, Louie has continued to interact with consumers via his Facebook page. It is also revealing to consider the Facebook likes (the equivalent of friends on a business page). At the time of writing, Reckitt Benckiser, the parent company of Mortein and other brands, has 75,451 likes. Mortein has only 121 likes and Louie the Fly has 273,866. This story is not an unusual one on social media. Popular spokes-character for comparethemarket.com, Aleksandr Orlov, has 811,195 Facebook likes, while his company does not have an official Facebook page at all. The M&M's characters share a

Facebook page which has 3,970,196 likes, while the parent company of M&Ms, Mars Inc, has only 6,745 likes.

Evidence suggests that consumers are engaging with brand *characters* via social media, but brand managers need to consider whether this engagement is transferring to the brand itself, and ultimately, leading to brand outcomes like loyalty and sales. Companies may be at risk of creating spokes-characters that are so engaging that consumers lose interest in the brand behind the character.
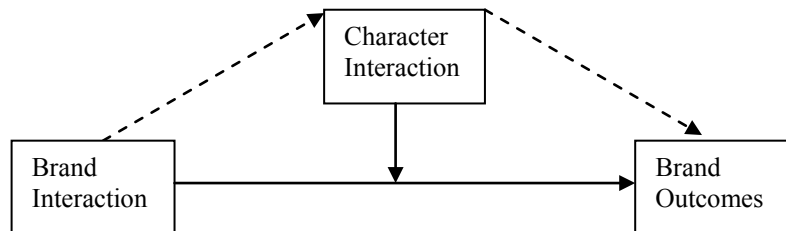
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Limited research is available on how the aforementioned interactions occur, and whether they are actually of benefit to the brand represented by the spokes-character. While previous research on spokes-characters and how they operate is available (e.g., Garretson & Niedrich, 2004; Phillips & Lee, 2005), none have studied interactions on social media like Facebook and Twitter, and what this might mean for the brand.

The following research questions are proposed in order to begin to fill the gap in both theoretical and practical knowledge that has been left in the wake of rapid technological development:

1. How do consumers interact with spokes-characters on social media?
2. What value do online spokes-character interactions have for consumers?
3. How does spokes-character engagement influence brand outcomes?

We propose that technology may in fact create distance between brands and consumers through the very tool marketers are employing to try and foster relationships: spokes-characters. In order to test these questions, a multistage study is required, involving firstly observation of interactions between consumers and a character/brand on social media, followed by overt questioning of consumers to determine the value derived and subsequent brand outcomes. Given that consumers may be unaware that anthropomorphism has occurred, experimental research will be particularly appropriate to test these relationships. A proposed model is presented at Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
PROPOSED MODEL

CONCLUSION

Spokes-characters have long been used in traditional marketing communications as brand and product representatives, and have shown they have a high degree of longevity owing to their ability to change with current culture and technology. Technology potentially offers new opportunities to create engaging relationships between spokes-characters and consumers, but ultimately the over-arching goal to create positive brand outcomes must not be forgotten; spokes-characters are but a tool to try and facilitate these outcomes. It is not enough to create an engaging character that consumers care about, interact with and emulate in their attitudes and behaviours. Strong links between the brand and the character are just as important, if not more important, than the relationship between the character and the consumer. In a world where we have both human and cartoon 'friends' that we have never met, the line between fantasy and

reality has become blurred. We propose that this presents both challenges and opportunities for brands, which require further study.

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