

The Effect of Spokes - Character Credibility on Consumers' Attitude and Buying Intention : A South African Focus

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Abstract

The recent technological development in animation has provided an attractive alternative to break into the cluttered marketing environment. Created animated spokes-characters can be used as brand endorsers in today's era. The purpose of this article was to investigate the impact of advertisements and brands that use spokes-characters on purchase intention. The study surveyed 260 respondents in Johannesburg City, South Africa. The study found that consumers like spokes-characters and adverts that use spokes-characters. Moreover, the research findings revealed that only spokes-character attractiveness and expertise influence attitude toward the adverts and spokes-character trust influences attitude towards the brand. In addition, the results reflect that companies can use spokes-characters to improve chances to engage customers about the brand and create long-term relationship and commitment.

Keywords: attitude, attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness and purchase intention

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The inescapable gravity of animated spokes-character cannot be overlooked as brand endorsers in today's cluttered marketing environment. The technological development in creating animated spokes-characters has provided an appealing and safe alternative to human endorsers. Human endorsers, such as celebrities, have been used since the late nineteenth century and have been established as one of the most effective methods of advertising by marketers (Erdogan, 1999). However, celebrity endorsements come with challenges such as; overshadowing the brand, public controversy, image change, loss of public recognition, and costs associated with endorsement deals (Harrington, 2014 ; Kim, 2012). In addition, for an endorsement to be successful, there must be a celebrity-product fit supported by the match-up hypothesis model (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008). All of these may affect the image of the brand negatively ; thus reversing advantages of using celebrities. In a nutshell, the challenge with celebrity endorsement lies in the fact that celebrities remain humans and humans are not perfect (Kim, 2012). Therefore, the brand is always at risk of being affected by the celebrity's professional and personal life.

On the other hand, spokes-characters could be fictitious human or non-human spokes-characters such as animals, mythical beings (e.g. fairies), or product personifications (Waldt, Loggarenberg, & Wehmeyer, 2009).

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With the aid of created spokespersons, marketers have a higher degree of control and are able to create a better fit between the endorser and product because these characters are self-created by companies and are customized to fit the brand (Jayswal & Panchal, 2012). Marketers are able to give the character the features that are both effective with the target audience and congruent with desirable characteristics of the endorsed product (Chang, 2014 ; Stafford, Stafford, & Day, 2002). In addition, the use of a created spokesperson is less costly. Furthermore, created spokes-characters' endorsements have longevity as compared to human celebrity endorsers who have a limited longevity (Shanmugan & Sajal, 2013). Jayswal and Panchal (2012) posited that consumers can notice and watch advertisements featuring created spokes-characters more than other advertisements. In light of the above, there is a need for a research work to address the question that should the risk and challenges inherent in utilizing celebrity endorsements be addressed by making use of created spokes-characters ?

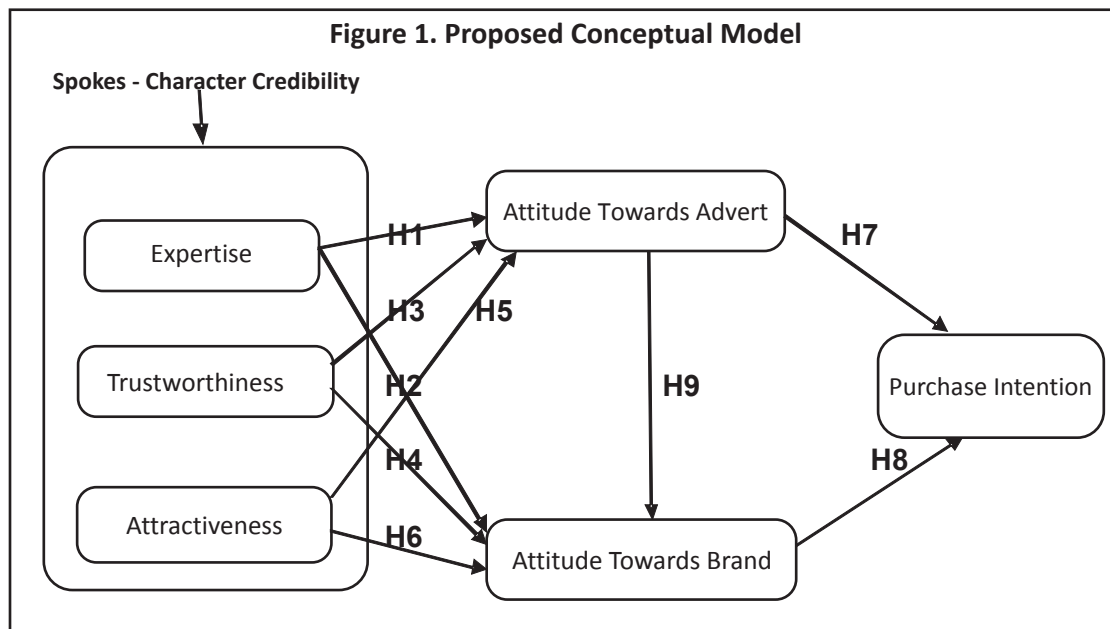
Although, animated spokes-characters seem to come with advantages, little is known about the created spokes-characters endorsers that are not celebrities (Waldt, Loggerenberg, & Wehmeyer, 2009) and especially in the South African context. In addition, studies that have been conducted in the past have mainly focused on spokes-characters as endorsers for products targeted at children (Boyland, Harrold, Kirkham, & Halford, 2012 ; Kelly, Hattersley, King, & Flood, 2008). Therefore, there is a need for a study which examines the use of created non-celebrity spokes-characters as brand endorsers. Hence, to fulfil the objectives of the study, a model was developed and used to explore the effectiveness and viability of using spokes-characters as brand endorsers. Consequently, a survey was conducted in Gauteng - a province of South Africa.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework of source of credibility model (Ohanian, 1990) is the basis from which to investigate spokes-character credibility. The Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model underlying the arguments in this paper. The research model consists of three basic dimensions : expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. It further comprises of three more variables, that is, attitude towards brand, attitude towards advert (Mitchel & Olson, 1981 ; Shanmugan & Sajal, 2013), and purchase intention (Pornpitakpan, 2003). The two variables - attitude towards advert and attitude towards brand were added to examine how each of the spokes-character credibility dimensions (expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) individually influence attitude and also how attitude towards brand and attitude towards advert influences purchase intention. However, the model did not probe the relationship between spokes-character credibility dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The direct relationship of the credibility dimensions and purchase intention was not analyzed.

Shanmugan and Sajal (2013) put forward that the source credibility model gives the understanding that created spokes-characters can be more or less effective when used as endorsers. According to Pornpitakpan (2003), the perceived source credibility has some degree of influence on communication effectiveness. If the message source is perceived as being credible, consequently, the perceived quality of the product which is being endorsed will also be higher (Patel, 2009). Furthermore, high credibility becomes even more necessary when consumers hold negative views of the brand, because a credible source will prevent counter arguments to the message, hence resulting in the messaging being more persuasive (Byrne, Whitehead, & Breen, 2003).

Similarly, Pornpitakpan (2004), in a comparison study between high credibility and low credibility sources, put forward the following conclusions: a highly credible source was commonly found to induce more persuasion towards the advocacy than a low-credibility one. Further, the study found that higher the credibility of a source, the smaller was the price change required to attract new customers ; also, highly credible sources were rated as more believable and truthful than those associated with the low credibility source. In the case of attitude and behaviour, a highly credible source usually led to more behavioural compliance than did a low-credibility one, consequently, the degree of perceived credibility of the source influenced recipients' intention to use suggestions made by the source as to how to improve performance. However, lower credibility sources were more effective than higher



ones when focusing on behavioural rather than attitude changes, though in some cases, there was no difference in persuasiveness between the high - and the low-credibility sources on behavioural compliance.

According to Ohanian (1990), persuasiveness of a message depends upon the perceived level of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness associated with an endorser or communicator. Similarly, Lukas and Seno (2005) concurred a positive perception by the consumer of the three credibility dimensions. The dimensions are made up of five indicators, respectively.

The analysis of the credibility elements looks at the score given to the brand endorser and correlates them to the two variables: attitude towards the advert and attitude towards the brand. The higher the score for each element of perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Pornpitakpan, 2003), the higher the favourable attitudes toward adverts and attitudes towards brands (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). The score for each source credibility dimension is made up of the sum total of the five items measuring each dimension (Ohanian, 1990). The dimensions and indicators are discussed in detail below :

(1) Expertise : Pornpitakpan (2003) defined expertise as the extent to which a speaker is perceived to be capable of making a correct assertion of the brand. In the same manner, Garretson and Niedrich (2004) defined it as the perception that a source is able to make valid claims or has knowledge of the product. Furthermore, Garretson and Niedrich (2004) stated that spokes-characters have (in numerous campaigns) made product claims and have done so repeatedly from campaign to campaign, and as a result, consumers can perceive spokes-characters as experts. Sertoglu, Catli, and Korkmaz (2014) contended that celebrities might be perceived as having more expertise than created spokespersons.

Kim (2012) proposed that expert endorsers were more effective in increasing brand evaluations than celebrities for technology gadgets and among consumers with more product knowledge. Additionally, a source high in expertise, as compared to one low in expertise, appears to lead to positive attitudes toward the endorser and the advertisement; also, expert endorsers induce more positive product/brand quality ratings than do the celebrities (Pornpitakpan, 2003). A source/celebrity that is more of an expert has been found to be more persuasive and generates more intentions to buy a brand (Ohanian, 1990). Thus, it can be hypothesised that :

↳ **H₁:** The spokes - character expertise has a positive influence over the consumer's attitude towards an advertisement.

↳ **H₂:** The spokes-character expertise has a positive influence over the consumer's attitude towards a brand.

(2) Trustworthiness : Shanmugan and Sajal (2013) defined trustworthiness as the degree of confidence that the respondent has in the communicator's intentions and ability to make valid assertions. Garretson and Niedrich (2004) referred to the spokes-character trustworthiness as the expectation that the character will be honest, sincere, and reliable in its communication and promotion of products. In a comparison study between celebrity endorsers and created endorsers, Waldt et al. (2009) concluded that neither celebrities nor created endorsers are perceived to be more trustworthy or are perceived to possess more expertise than the other. According to Amos et al. (2008), a highly opinionated message from a highly trustworthy communicator produces an effective attitude change, while non-trusted communicators' impact proved immaterial. Furthermore, Kim (2012) concluded that perceived endorser trustworthiness appeared to produce a greater attitude change than perceived expertise. Amos et al. (2008) suggested that trustworthiness is an important predictor of endorsement effectiveness. Thus, it can be hypothesised that :

↳ **H₃ :** The spokes - character trustworthiness has a positive influence over the consumer's attitude towards an advertisement.

↳ **H₄:** The spokes - character trustworthiness has a positive influence over the consumer's attitude towards a brand.

(3) Attractiveness : Physically appealing endorsers influence the effectiveness of the advertising message and intent to purchase (Keel & Natarajan, 2012 ; Mishra, 2014). The inclusion of attractiveness was prompted by research suggesting that a physically attractive communicator is liked more and has a positive impact on opinion change and product evaluations (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000). According to Till and Bulser (2000), attractive celebrities are more effective endorsers for products which are used to enhance one's attractiveness and thus lead to higher brand attitude and purchase intentions. Advertisers have associated attractive endorsers with their brands because they are imbued with not only physical attractiveness, but also positive traits such as social competence, intellectual competence, concern for others, and integrity (Till & Bulser, 2000). Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

↳ **H₅:** The spokes- character attractiveness has a positive influence over the consumer's attitude towards an advertisement.

↳ **H₆:** The spokes-character attractiveness has a positive influence over the consumer's attitude towards a brand.

(4) Consumers' Intention to Purchase : Khan, Ghauri, and Majeed (2012) defined purchase intention as an individual's aim to buy specific brands which they have chosen for themselves after a certain evaluation process. Tariq, Nawaz, Nawaz, and Butt (2013) described that purchase intention relates to four behaviours of consumers including: the undoubted plan to buy a product, thinking unequivocally to purchase a product, when someone contemplates buying a product in the future, and to buy the specific product utterly. Also, Chinomona and Sandada (2013) explained that the intention by consumers to purchase reflects their interest in the product and hence, the willingness to buy the product or service. Khan, Ghauri, and Majeed (2012) depicted brand knowledge, brand relationship, behavioral intention, brand advertisement, and past experience about the brand as factors affecting the purchase intention of consumers. In their study, Chinomona and Sandada (2013) mentioned that the items that can be used to measure purchase include the probability of a consumer considering buying a product, the

consumer's willingness to buy, and the likelihood of consumer's purchase behaviour. According to Schiffman, Kanuk, and Wisenblit (2010), purchase intention can be measured using items such as: the consumer will definitely buy the product/brand, the probability that the consumer will purchase the product/brand, the consumers are uncertain whether they will buy the product/brand, the probability the consumer will not buy the product/brand, and the consumer definitely will not buy the product/brand.

(5) Attitude Towards Advert : Attitude toward Advert (Aad) is defined as an individual's evaluation of and/or affective feelings about an advertisement (Craton & Lantos, 2011). Commercials with animated spokes-characters have also been found to score above average in their ability to change brand preferences (Stallard, 2003). That is, if a person likes a spokes-character, the ad has a greater chance of attracting and maintaining a consumer's attention (Kinney & Ireland, 2015). Additionally, Ilicic and Webster (2011) and Jose and Saraswathiamma (2014) suggested that advertisements are capable of causing certain types of behavior and one of them is purchasing. Furthermore, MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986) and Mitchell and Olson (1981) concluded that Aad is an affective construct representing consumers' feelings of favourability or not toward the ad itself, which is a mediating influence on brand attitude and purchase intention. Thus, it can be hypothesised that :

↪ **H₇:** Consumer's attitude towards an advertisement has a positive influence over the consumer's intention to purchase.

(6) Attitude Towards Brand (Ab) : Attitude towards brand (Ab) is the recipients' affective reactions toward the advertised brand or where there is a desirable attitude toward purchasing the brand (MacKenzie et al., 1986). Brand beliefs and feelings are formed through advertising, and these beliefs affect attitudes toward ads and consequently, attitudes toward the brands being advertised. Also, frequent exposure of a trade character would cause high recognition of the trade character and the product, and it also leads to favourable attitudes toward the product/brand, and influences the consumer to use the product/brand in the future (Jose & Saraswathiamma, 2014 ; Sallam & Wahid, 2012). Additionally, animated spokes-characters reduce the distance between companies and consumers, that is, they encourage consumers' liking for the spokes-character which then is extended to the brand and its products (Huang, Hu, & Wu, 2013). Jayswal and Panchal (2012) proposed that cartoon spokes-characters are more creative and consumers display more positive responses for attitude towards advertisements, attitude towards brand, and purchase intention when compared to human spokespersons. Ghorban (2012) contended that after attitude toward advertisements is formed, it would affect different behaviours such as brand attitude and purchasing intention, that is, advertising, as an effective marketing tool, is able to positively and significantly influence brand attitude by building a positive perception of brands in the minds of customers. Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

↪ **H₈:** Consumer's attitude toward a brand has a positive influence over the consumer's intention to purchase the advertised product.

↪ **H₉:** There is a positive relationship between the consumer's attitude towards the advertisement and consumer's attitude towards the brand.

Methodology

(1) Sample and Data Collection : To fulfil the objectives of the research, a survey was conducted at one of the universities in Johannesburg, South Africa. The target population for the study was students between the ages of 18-35 years. The target population (age) group was chosen for several reasons which included : interest in using

different media channels, respondents' being knowledgeable about the mentioned advertisements and also about celebrities and/or created spokespersons, and every young adult consumer could be considered as a potential future buyer (Sertoglu et al., 2014). Furthermore, this age group consisted mainly of the millennial generation (people born between the years 1979-1994). According to Strauss and Frost (2014), the millennial generation is an important market segment because more than half of them watch television, spend most of their time on the Internet, and use many media channels, thereby increasing their likelihood of being aware of the adverts used in the study.

A non-random sampling method was used to collect data easily collected as compared to random sampling where student registers have to be used and random ticking of student numbers done, however, this can make it hard to track down students. In addition, convenience sampling is economical, has very low costs, and respondents are easily accessible. Out of the 350 questionnaires distributed, only 260 questionnaires were fit to be used in the study, indicating a response rate of 74%. The questionnaires were handed out to students in labs and in the library lawns on the university campus. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to be filled in. The data was collected between July and August 2014. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was guaranteed as the questionnaires were anonymously answered.

To reduce the disparities in response patterns, which might have been caused by diverse reference points, all participants were encouraged to respond to the questionnaires based on an exemplary spokes-character advertisement, guided by the research assistants. A devised spokes-character advertisement was created in order to put the participants in a practical setting. Simply describing the philosophy of spokes-characters without the example could have held the danger that participants did not completely comprehend the phenomenon.

(2) Measurement Instrument : The scales to measure credibility of the spokes - character, the source credibility scale were adapted from Ohanian (1990). Furthermore, four items (good - bad, likeable - not likeable, irritating - not irritating, and interesting-not interesting) to measure overall perception of the brand were adapted from Mitchell and Olson (1981). To measure purchase intention, the respondents were asked whether they were likely or unlikely to: inquire about the product, look for the product in their store, look for information about the product, and consider buying or actually buying the endorsed product (Pornpitakpan, 2003). Appropriate amendments to the scales were done, where necessary, to suit the context of the study. In all scales, a 7 - point Likert scale was used, with 7 indicating *strongly agree* and 1 point indicating *strongly disagree*.

(3) Respondents' Profile : The Table 1 shows the respondents' profile. The respondents were predominantly females (51.8%). Approximately half of the participants were aged between 18 and 20 years (49.2 %). Also, most of the respondents (35.4%) were first year students. Additionally, fewer respondents were aged between 33 and 35 years (4.6 %) and only 18 students were Masters or PhD students. The majority of the respondents were from the Faculty of Humanities (43.1%) and the minority were from the Faculty of Health Sciences (8.1%).

(4) Measure Validation : The validity of the model was checked in accordance with the two-step procedure prior to testing the hypotheses (Bryne, 2001). The Table 2 shows the results of the 7 model fit. To validate the research model fitness, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS version 22 statistical software program.

The Table 3 and Table 4 show the results of convergent validity and discriminant validity, respectively that were performed. The results for Model 1 produced a ratio of chi-square value over degree-of-freedom of 2.228, and the *GFI*, *AGFI*, *RMR*, *NFI*, *TLI*, *IFI*, and *RMSEA* values are 0.845, 0.810, 0.149, 0.863, 0.845, 0.908, 0.919, 0.920, and 0.069, respectively.

The model fit indices are moderately acceptable, because the *GFI*, *AGFI*, *NFI* are above 0.8, however, the values are not above 0.9. To improve the model, the modification indices suggest that error terms' convergent

Table 1. Demographic Statistics

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	126	48.5%
Female	134	51.5%
Total	260	100%
Age	Frequency	%
18-20	128	49.2%
21-23	80	30.8%
24-26	27	10.4%
27-29	7	2.7%
30-32	6	2.3%
33-35	12	4.6%
Total	260	100%
Level of Education	Frequency	%
1st Year	92	35.4%
2nd Year	54	20.8%
3rd Year	39	15.0%
Honours	57	21.9%
Masters	16	6.2
PhD	2	0.8%
Total	260	100%
Faculty		
Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management	64	24.6
Faculty of Health Sciences	21	8.1
Faculty of Humanities	112	43.1
Faculty of Sciences	26	10.0
Engineering and the Built Environment Faculty	37	14.2
Total	260	100.0

Table 2. Overall Model Fit

Model Fit Criteria	Model 1	Model 2
Chi-square (χ^2)	2.228	1.490
Goodness-of-fit (<i>GFI</i>)	0.845	0.894
Augmented Goodness-of-fit (<i>AGFI</i>)	0.810	0.867
Root mean square residual (<i>RMR</i>)	0.149	0.103
Norm-fit-index (<i>NFI</i>)	0.863	0.912
<i>RFI</i>	0.845	0.896
Tucker-Lewis Index (<i>TLI</i>)	0.908	0.963
Comparative fit index (<i>CFI</i>)	0.919	0.969
Incremental fit index (<i>IFI</i>)	0.920	0.969
Root mean square error of approximation (<i>RMSEA</i>)	0.069	0.044

Table 3. Results of the Accuracy Analysis Statistics

Research Construct		Cronbach's α value	C.R. Value	AVE Value	Factor Loading
SA	SA1	0.888	0.880	0.668	0.897
	SA2				0.891
	SA3				0.847
	SA4				0.827
ST	ST1	0.894	0.898	0.643	0.914
	ST2				0.895
	ST3				0.865
	ST4				0.768
	ST5				0.754
SE	SE1	0.918	0.920	0.691	0.903
	SE2				0.867
	SE3				0.866
	SE4				0.857
	SE5				0.903
ATA	ATA1	0.637	0.640	0.405	0.950
	ATA2				0.948
	ATA3				0.887
	ATA4				0.871
ATB	ATB1	0.779	0.772	0.500	0.866
	ATB2				0.844
	ATB3				0.745
	ATB4				0.676
PI	PI1	0.904	0.880	0.591	0.896
	PI2				0.880
	PI3				0.869
	PI4				0.856
	PI5				0.755

Note: ATA = Attitude towards Advert, ATB =Attitude towards Brand, SA = Spokes-character Attractiveness, ST = Spokes-character Trustworthiness, SE = Spokes-character Expertise and PI= Purchase Intention

Table 4. Correlations Between Constructs

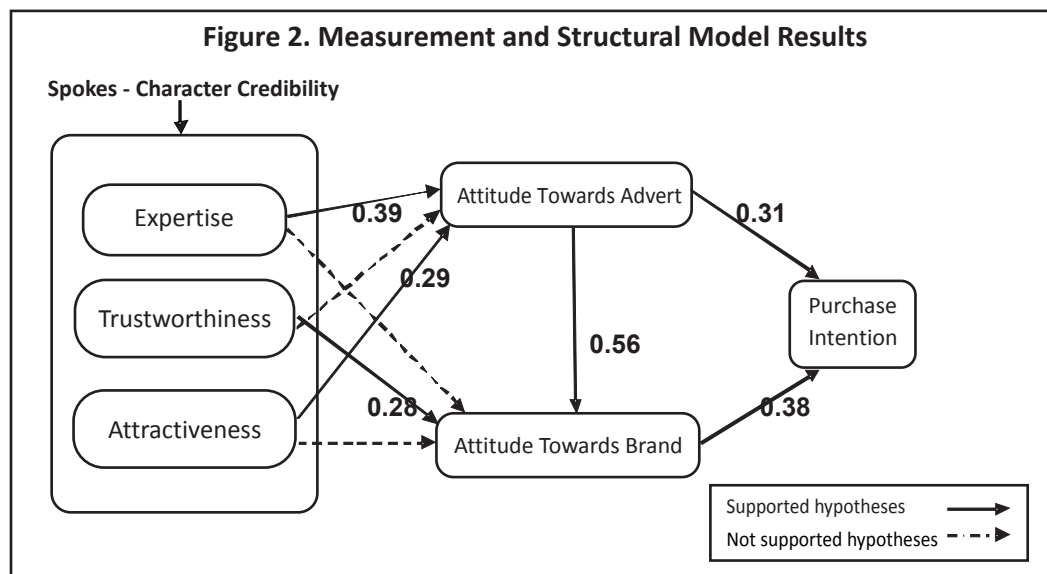
Research Variables	ATA	ATB	SA	ST	SE	PI
Attitude toward Advert (<i>ATA</i>)	1					
Attitude toward Brand (<i>ATB</i>)	0.434	1				
Spokes-character Attractiveness (<i>SA</i>)	0.317	0.358	1			
Spokes-character Trustworthiness (<i>ST</i>)	0.322	0.414	0.576	1		
Spokes-character Expertise (<i>SE</i>)	0.341	0.378	0.536	0.689	1	
Purchase Intention (<i>PI</i>)	0.361	0.509	0.543	0.422	0.484	1

validity is assessed by checking if individual item loadings for each corresponding research construct is above the recommended value of 0.6 (Chin, 1998). As indicated in the Table 3, all items have loadings greater than 0.6 (i.e. ranging from 0.676 to 0.950). Therefore, all the items finally used have a loading of more than the recommended value of 0.5, indicating acceptable individual item convergent validity as more than 50% of each item's variance is shared with its respective construct. This evidence supports the convergent validity of all scale items.

The method that was used to check the discriminant validity of the research constructs was the evaluation of whether the correlations among the latent variables were less than 0.8. As indicated in Table 4, the inter-correlation values for all paired latent variables are less than 0.8; the lowest correlation is between spokes-character attractiveness and attitude towards advert (0.317) with the highest between spokes-character expertise and spokes-character trustworthiness (0.689). Therefore, this indicates the existence of discriminant validity.

Data Analysis and Results

↳ **Path Model** : Smart PLS software for the structural equation modelling (SEM) technique was used for the data analysis (Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005). The Figure 2 and Table 5 highlight the results of the analysis on the structural model along with the path estimates and t - values. Support for the study hypotheses, which are labelled on their corresponding paths in Figure 2, were determined by testing the directionality (positive or negative) of the path coefficients and the significance of t -values. The Figure 2 shows the revised proposed conceptual model with path co-efficient showing the relationships between the variables. The model shows that only six out nine hypotheses that were tested are supported.



The results depicted in Table 5 provide support for the proposed hypotheses H1 and H5, but hypothesis H3 is not supported. By implication, this means that the higher is the level of perceived spokes-character attractiveness and expertise by consumers, the more likely it is that the consumers will have a positive attitude towards an advert. That is, spokes-character trustworthiness has no effect on attitude towards an advert. However, the findings show that expertise and attractiveness of a spokes-character influences attitude towards an advert. The findings are contrary to the findings of Mitchell and Olson (1981) and Goldsmith et al. (2000) as these studies found all three credibility dimensions to have an effect on attitude toward the advert.

Table 5. Results of Structural Equation Model Analysis

Variable relationships	Hypothesis	<i>p</i> - Value	Path Coefficient	Support/Not supported
<i>SE</i> --- > <i>ATA</i>	H1	***	0.39	Support
<i>SE</i> --- > <i>ATB</i>	H2	0.004	-0.04	Not supported
<i>ST</i> --- > <i>ATA</i>	H3	0.267	0.07	Not supported
<i>ST</i> --- > <i>ATB</i>	H4	***	0.28	Support
<i>SA</i> --- > <i>ATA</i>	H5	***	0.29	Support
<i>SA</i> --- > <i>ATB</i>	H6	0.002	0.04	Not supported
<i>ATA</i> --- > <i>PI</i>	H7	***	0.31	Support
<i>ATB</i> --- > <i>PI</i>	H8	***	0.38	Support
<i>ATA</i> --- > <i>ATB</i>	H9	***	0.56	Support

Significance level = 0.001***,

Note: *ATA* = Attitude towards Advert, *ATB* = Attitude towards Brand, *SA* = Spokes-character Attractiveness, *ST*= Spokes-character Trustworthiness, *SE* = Spokes-character Expertise, and *PI* = Purchase Intention

However, the present study found that expertise (0.39) has a greater influence on attitude towards an advert than attractiveness (0.29), echoing the results of Till and Busler (2000) and concurring with the results of Waldt et al. (2009) and Sertoglu et al. (2014), where created spokes-characters were found to be less attractive than human endorsers, but were found to have more expertise than celebrity endorsers (Sertoglu et al., 2014). However, these results are contrary to the findings of Sallam and Wahid (2012), who concluded that attractiveness has more influence on attitude towards an advert than expertise.

The results of the study provide support to the hypothesis that higher the level of perceived spokes-character trustworthiness (0.28) by consumers, the more likely it is that the consumers will have a positive attitude towards a brand. These results are similar to the findings of Garretson and Niedrich (2004), who found that perceived spokes-character trust was found to favourably influence brand attitude. However, H2 and H6 are not significant, therefore, implying that spokes-character expertise and attractiveness do not influence attitude towards a brand.

The empirical results are in line with the proposed H7 and H8 and support the reasoning that attitude towards an advert and attitude towards a brand both positively influence consumer purchase intention of products/services endorsed by spokes-characters. Attitude towards a brand (0.38) is a more influential factor than attitude towards an advert (0.31). These findings support the results obtained by Goldsmith et al. (2000). Hence, it is understood that a consumer, who is effectively affected by advertising, will form a positive attitude towards the advert that will then influence his/her purchase intention (Jose & Saraswathamma, 2014). Also, if a consumer likes a brand, it will positively influence his/her purchase intention (Mitchell & Olson, 1981).

Finally, the results support H9 and confirm that there is a significant relationship between *Aad* and *Ab*. The coefficient of the relationship between attitude towards advert and attitude towards brand is the highest (0.56) and positively significant. This is consistent with the study prediction, and H9 is strongly supported. This confirms the proposed consequential relationship between *Aad*, *AB*, and *PI* by MacKenzie et al. (1986), who found that if consumers are exposed to messages, they form brand beliefs, which affects their attitude towards ads, and consequently, attitude towards the brands being advertised ; if a positive perception is formed, subsequently there may be purchase intention of the advertised brand.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research reveals that spokes-character attractiveness and expertise have a positive effect on attitude towards an

advert. By implication, this means that when consumers perceive a spokes-character to be attractive and an expert, they will be positively influenced and hence like an advert which uses the spokes-character. This finding is in line with Mishra's (2014) framed propositions related to the impact of attractive/unattractive spokes-characters in terms of product types (attractiveness related vs. attractiveness un-related). The results also support Brown and Stayman's (1992) conclusion that the liking of an advert may be the best indicator of advertising effectiveness.

Moreover, as it has been found that perceived spokes-character expertise will influence attitude towards an advert, by implication, this essentially means that if consumers' perceive the spokes-character to be making valid claims or having adequate knowledge of the product (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004), they are more likely to be drawn to the advert and consider the message put across.

However, the study concludes that spokes-character trustworthiness does have an effect on attitude towards an advert. By and large, this denotes that as consumers watch adverts that use spokes-characters, their degree of confidence in the spokes-character's communication intention is low, and thus, they do not perceive the message to be reliable. In addition, Garretson and Niedrich (2004) suggested that perceived expertise is significant in the development of trust for endorsers ; and hence, is an important dimension of building credibility for spokes-characters as the study shows this variable to be the more influential factor with respect to forming an attitude towards an advert.

Additionally, the research finds that only spokes-characters' trustworthiness positively influences attitude towards a brand. This essentially indicates that if consumers perceive the spokes-character to be sincere and honest, they will have a positive attitude towards a brand. In a similar manner, Amos et al. (2008) proposed that trustworthiness is an important predictor of endorsement effectiveness, and as a result, the higher the perceived trustworthiness, the more consumers will like the brand endorsed by a spokes-character.

On the other hand, the findings establish that spokes-character attractiveness and spokes-character expertise do not have an effect on attitude towards a brand. In essence, this means that consumers do not perceive spokes-characters that have endorsed brands to be attractive or to be experts, therefore, implying that these two credibility dimensions may not influence a consumer's perception of the endorsed brand.

The results provide support to the hypothesis that attitude towards the advert significantly and positively influences purchase intention. By and large, this means that if consumers are exposed to an advert using spokes-character and like the advert, consequently, the liking of the advert will result in the consumers' contemplating purchasing the advertised product in the future. Moreover, our study finds that there is a significant and positive relationship between attitude towards a brand and purchase intention. That is, if a brand is endorsed by a spokes-character and a consumer likes the brand, the consumer is more likely to consider and plan to purchase the endorsed brand. Additionally, the study finds that attitude towards a brand is a greater influential factor on purchase intention than attitude towards an advert. This means that the consumer's perception of the brand is more likely to influence his/her purchase decision than would his/her perception of the advert using a spokes-character.

Interestingly, it is found that attitude towards an advert and attitude towards a brand, both simultaneously play mediator roles in the relationship between spokes-character credibility and purchase intention, implying a causal relationship between attitude towards an advert, attitude towards a brand, and ultimately, the purchase intention is stronger than the two direct relationships between attitude towards an advert and purchase intention, and attitude towards a brand and purchase intention.

Implications

It can be recommended that companies start using spokes-characters because the human quality of spokes-characters will improve chances of consumers forming a relationship with the brand in which the consumer may show affection and long commitment towards a brand. Given that the study focused on young consumers (ages 18-35 years), an important segment, that is, potential future consumers, it is important that companies start

establishing and building long-term relationships with existing/potential consumers.

Moreover, the main implication for marketing practitioners is that if they decide to use a spokes-character in an advertisement, not all credibility dimensions are important in influencing consumers' attitude towards the advert. Spokes-character attractiveness and expertise will be helpful to lead to higher created spokes-character credibility, thus influencing the liking of the advert. Therefore, when companies are designing and developing spokes-characters, they should ensure that they consider traits such as beautiful, elegant, and classy to increase the attractiveness of the spokes-character and also consider qualities such as skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable to increase expertise of the character. The increase in higher credibility dimensions such as attractiveness and expertise have been found to be the factors that have an effect on attitude towards the advert.

Marketers should note that since expertise is a more influential factor on attitude towards an advert, therefore, they should ensure that in the development or updating of the spokes-character, it is authoritative enough to speak for the brand. Furthermore, the presence of expertise is significant in the development of spokes-character trust, an important credibility dimension that has been found to be the only one to influence attitude towards the brand. Accordingly, it can also be commended that if companies decide to use spokes-characters or are already using them, they should make certain that in the design of the spokes-character, it is imbued with personae such as honest, reliable, and sincere. Such elements will help create consumer perceptions that do not only infer the brand as dependable, but also view the company as an expert in the product category it is promoting.

Limitations of the Study and the Way Forward

Due to time and budgetary constraints, the study at hand only focused on a target sample of respondents aged between 18 and 35 years. Care should be exercised in the interpretation and the application of the results of this study and the generalization of the findings to the whole of South Africa. Therefore, future research studies should include other age groups. Spokes-characters have been mainly associated with products or services targeting children. Future research could be done to investigate the effect of perceived spokes-character attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness on attitude towards advert and brand, and consequently on purchase intention of high involvement products or services requiring huge investments.

The present research only included spokes-characters created solely to promote brands. However, a comparative study between created spokes-characters and celebrity spokes-characters usually used in cartoon movies or programmes licensed by companies could be considered to provide valuable insights. Most spokes-characters have been used to endorse several products/services in different industries. Future research could be done on the match-up hypothesis to explore what spokes-character qualities match with particular product categories and examine the marketing implications.

All in all, the study confirms that consumers like adverts that use spokes-characters. Hence, the findings of this research provide valuable insights into how owners and managers of different industries and sizes of businesses can employ the created, animated spokes-characters to break through the cluttered marketing environment and enthruse consumers to pay attention to their communications about product offerings.

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