

The Design and Communication Strategy of Virtual Idols “Luo Tianyi(洛天依)”

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Abstract

The digital age start in earnest with the widespread use of the Internet. As a digital product, virtual idols bring new value to the design and dissemination of commercial brand images. "Luo Tianyi" is the world's first avatar and VOCALOID voice bank of Chinese. It has a large number of fans in China and is widely used in brand promotion. Therefore, "Luo Tianyi" is taken as the research object. Initially, we investigated the virtual idols through books, literature on the internet and other materials. Then we discussed semiotics and theories related to culture code brand design methodology (CCBD). After that, putting the above theories into practice, combined with brand design cases, we analyzed the strategy of virtual idols in brand promotion and dissemination, at last, we have the conclusion as followed.

The results show that the virtual idols, visual symbol of "Luo Tianyi" can express the Index and Symbol corresponding to the brand information according to the characteristics of the brand. As an image of cultural code, "Luo Tianyi" can present three visual images at the same time, which are contemporary, traditional and future. In addition, these three visual images are presented in a strong and weak combination, which has a positive impact on the visual communication of the brand.

Keywords: Virtual Idol, Brand Image Semiotics, Brand Communication, CCBD

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual idol, refers to an artificially created virtual character (identity usually as a singer, actor, idol, etc.) by means of computer graphics, etc.[1] The application of virtual idols in advertising is a new extension of the USP advertising theory, also known as "Unique Selling Proposition", which was proposed by American advertiser Russell Reeves in his 1961 book Reality in Advertising[2]. As a typical symbol of the current popular secondary culture, virtual idols have a good consumer appeal. At the same time, the "Generation Z" digital natives are growing up and gradually entering the society, beginning to have more social discourse and economic power, becoming a consumer group with great potential. According to the "2019 Virtual Idol Observation Report" released by the Akiyo National Creative Planning Center, by the end of 2019, China's "post-95s" had reached 250 million people, accounting for 52% of the overall Internet users, becoming the backbone of China's Internet. By 2020, China's young people of Generation Z are expected to account for 40% of the total number of domestic consumers[3].

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"Luo Tianyi" is the world's first VOCALOID Chinese voice and avatar created by China Huanian Information Technology Co. "Luo Tianyi" has a huge fan base, and "according to her company, she has more than 10 million teenage fans, over 10,000 original songs, and 10,000 content creators writing songs for her every year. She has more than 10 million teenage fans, with more than 10,000 original songs " [4].

Virtual idol advertising endorsement has an irreplaceable advantage over real idols. Virtual idols are more malleable than real idols and can readily adjust their attributes (such as eternal youth, warmth and affability, no scandals or negative news, etc.) according to fans' expectations, which makes them infinitely more likely to be the "perfect persona" in the minds of fans. In-depth research on a series of issues such as "what role do virtual idols play in brand promotion" and "how effective is the brand communication of virtual idols". This study has certain implications and practical significance for the development of virtual idols and brand communication strategies in the Internet era in China.

2. RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODS

The researcher takes the Chinese virtual idol "Luo Tianyi" as the research object, and uses semiotics and CCBD theory to analyze the relationship between "Luo Tianyi" and Chinese brands through literature research and case studies, and to study the use and effect of virtual idols in brand promotion and communication. Using Peirce's semiotics as the main theoretical basis and research method, this paper analyzes the symbolic meaning of the virtual idol "Luo Tianyi" as a singer and the product-related symbolic meaning in the brand promotion. Using the Cultural Code Brand Design Methodology (CCBD), we analyze the role of "Luo Tianyi" in brand communication based on the theoretical basis of the brand's Touchpoint design and the cultural code of the image.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Virtual Idols as Symbols

Charles Sanders Peirce, recognized as the founder of American pragmatist philosophy, and Saussure of Switzerland founded semiotics, respectively. Peirce's symbolic thought, in terms of content, can be simply divided into two major parts: the elaboration of the symbol itself and the classification of the symbol, but these two parts are often intertwined. The concept of sign occupies a very important place in his thought[5].

Peirce summarizes the relationship between a symbol and the object it refers to in three cases: one in which there is some similarity between the two, one in which the latter leads to the existence of the former, and one in which the relationship between the two is conventional. Peirce refers to the symbols in these three cases as icon, index and symbol respectively.(Table 1)

Table 1. Peirce's three types of symbols

	Icon	Index	Symbol
Expressions	Image	Logical relationships	Covenant or rule
Paradigm	Photos, maps	Smoke and Fire	Words, Numbers
Process	Viewable	It is possible to think of	Need to learn

Iconic symbols: These symbols are related to the referent object by being "identical in nature" to the referent object. In other words, if we find that the symbol and its referent object have some common properties, the symbol is an iconic symbol.

Sign symbol: A sign symbol is a "realistic correspondence" between a symbol and its referent object, such

as a wind vane. The wind vane is the symbol, and the wind is the object of reference.

Symbolic symbol: A symbol is a symbol if there is "an artificially added quality" between it and its referent. In other words, the symbol was created to refer to something.

The idols we understand are generally "living, personalized objects that can be understood, interacted with, remembered, and have emotions". However, these characteristics of virtual idols are made up of pure data, and the gap between real idols and virtual idols is easily smoothed out. (Virtual idols: hyper-real, symbolic and aesthetic illusion) Both real idols and virtual idols are essentially a system of symbols produced through visual symbolic coding. They are active on the screen, social networking sites and in the topics of daily life, becoming the objects of people's emotional projection and realities in their lives[6].

3.2 Brand Touchpoint Design and Virtual Idols

Brand touchpoint design is "all the touchpoints where brands and products come into contact with customers". Brands communicate information to consumers through each Touchpoint. In order to effectively communicate brand information, there are six types of brand Touchpoint design that enhance consumer persuasion and trust, based on the criteria of conveying information of understanding, information of need, and information of perception[7]. Before distinguishing these six types, it is important to first study cultural codes and cultural characteristics based on the Principle Functions of Brand Design and Derivative Functions of Brand Design, cultural codes, cultural characteristics, and cultural types, and study Visual Culture Code based on the constructed cultural codes. And according to the cultural codes of Principle Functions (of Brand Design) and Derivative Functions of Brand Design, the conditions of each brand Touchpoint design type are studied. Second, the six brand design types were divided into three pairs with polarities. The three brand design polarities include Sustainable Design and Ephemeral Design(Table 2) for the purpose of conveying understanding information, Motivation Design and Stimulus-response Design for the purpose of conveying demand information, and Soft Subject Design and Histrionic Design for the purpose of conveying perceptual information. If the six brand design types and three pairs of brand designs are applied strategically, there is no problem in building a diverse and differentiated brand design, so that the brand's goals can be achieved[8].

Table 2. Characteristics of Sustainable Design and Ephemeral Design

Sortation	Sustainable Design	Ephemeral Design
	Aesthetic consistency	Aesthetic diversity
	Longer functional life	Short-lived functionality
	Doesn't change the needs of the times easily	A change in the needs of the times
Characteristic	Maintain continuous functionality	Maintain short-term functionality
	Long-term image communication	Short-term image communication
	Not sensitive to style and trends	Sensitive to style and trends
	Low relationship with seasonal anniversaries	Seasons and anniversaries are highly related
	Unable to adapt consumer response easily	Easily apply consumer responses

Motivation Design :

"Motivation Design" is a brand touchpoint design that measures the practical needs of consumers' physiological needs, and is based on the brand's original functional elements that attract consumers and impel

consumer behavior.

Stimulus-response Design :

"Stimulus-response Design" is a visual design element that is derived from the general needs of consumers, satisfies the psychological needs, i.e., the need for pleasure, and attracts consumers to purchase, emphasizing that the derivative function of the brand is external stimulation, and satisfies the social status, desire, and personal performance that comes with the purchase decision.

Soft Subject Design :

The "Soft Subject Design" type of brand Touchpoint design is a way for consumers to express the brand without social problems. Its method of witty and pleasant soft subject design can express laughter and positive feelings, and bring a sense of happiness.

Hard Subject Design :

In P. Ekman's basic sensibility, "Hard Subject Design" induces terror, anger, happiness, fear, sadness, and surprise through impactful or cutting-edge visual elements that make people feel novel or emotionally unsettled.

3.3 Virtual Idols as Image Culture Code

No brand strives to create a negative impression on consumers. Every brand strives to show the positive side of the brand. This is why image style and strategy are important in building a brand image. While image plays a variety of roles in branding, one of the most important is to make the prospect the intended customer for the brand. The potential customers of a brand are those who skim around the brand. However, if a positive image is presented that stimulates the needs and desires of potential customers, most of them will develop into new customers. If care and effort are consistently shown to these new customers, the new customers will become regular customers of the brand, and then become the desired customers of the brand.

Unique and fresh image presentation visually intrigues people and reminds them of the design information. Among the various image presentation methods, the most used and influential ones are "Forced Connexion" and "Metaphor", which are situations where more than two unexpected visual elements are gathered in the same environment and appear to be one visual element. "Metaphor" is a situation where design information and unexpected visual elements come together in a proper and convincing way.

Due to the visual representation and communication elements, the types of images are divided. Since there are differences in communication styles due to different image types, image types should be studied considering the brand image and message.

The image representation type has the following 3 types(Figure 1) of representation elements.[9]

Tradition Image Representation: TIR

- When using elements or styles that are strongly associated with past time.
- The elements of representation - conservative trust, heritage, tradition, history, authenticity, and sophistication.

Contemporary Image Representation: CIR

- When using elements or styles that are closely related to the current time
- Elements of expression: youth, trend, technical competence, desire

Futuristic Image Representation: FIR

- When using elements or styles that are closely related to the future time
- Elements of expression_ new materials, innovation, avant-garde, science

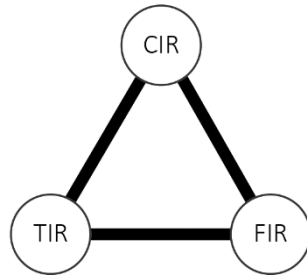


Figure 1. Image Representation Triad Relationship

3.4 The Advantages of Virtual Idols in Brand Communication



The advantages of virtual idols in brand communication are relative to real idols and anime anthropomorphic images in brand communication. The advantage of virtual idols over real idols is that virtual idols have the symbolic feature of "personality traits", which is more in line with the consumption ecology of the Internet era than the "cult" symbolic feature of real idols. Virtual idols cultivate brand emotions through interaction with consumers, and build a friendly "personality trait" symbol image as the core, which is the process of making friends with customers and can form a stronger sense of brand immersion and empathy experience.

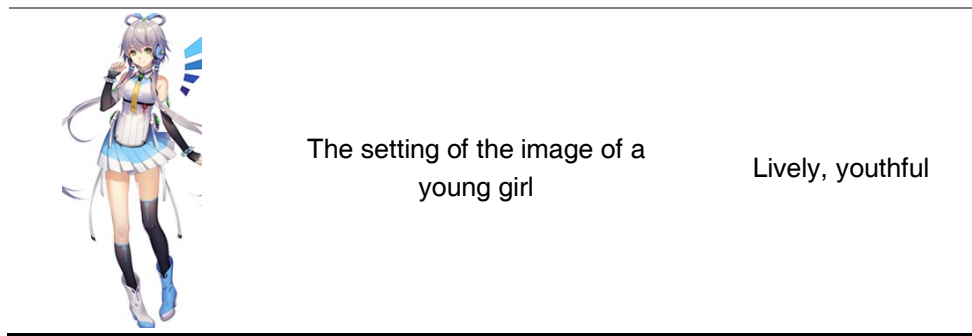
In contemporary brand design, anime anthropomorphic images and virtual idols are often mixed up and misused. Although both have the symbolic qualities of "cute" and "personality traits", anime anthropomorphic images are anthropomorphic symbols given to objects or animals (e.g. Michelin tire man, Japanese Kumamoto bear, etc.), and their symbols are closer to mascots or pets than to idols. Compared with virtual idols, the symbolic personality of anime anthropomorphic images is more abstract and suitable for endorsing abstract brands with stable personalities, such as cultural and tourism industries. Virtual idols have real human models and their symbolic images are close to those of idols, so they are more likely to form deep empathy experiences for consumers, and therefore can endorse food, cosmetics, electronic products, cars, etc. The boundaries of application are broader[10].

4. CASE STUDY

"Luo Tianyi" is a singer, a young girl with gray hair and green pupils, 15 years old and 156 cm tall, who performs in the real world through augmented reality or holographic projection. The image of "Luo Tianyi" is a combination of traditional, present and future visual features. The image of "Luo Tianyi" will appear differently in different brands, depending on the characteristics of the brand and the product. However, her inherent image is definite, and the analysis of her inherent symbolic image is as follows.(Table 3)

Table 3. Analyzing the Virtual Idol Symbol of "Luo Tianyi" with Pierce's Semiotics

The inherent symbolic image of "Luo Tianyi"		
Icon	Index	Symbol
	Hairstyle of the woman in the Chinese painting "Luo Shen Fu"	The embodiment of Chinese style
	Green Gems	Cute, approachable, smart


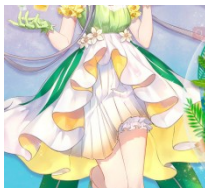



L'Occitane is a cosmetic brand whose main product features are green and healthy, with verbena and sweet lentils as the main ingredients, and whose main effects are refreshment, stress relief and skin firming. The spokesperson "Luo Tianyi"(Figure 2) appeared in the consumer's view with an image that matched the characteristics of the product, and its symbolic image changed.(Table 4)



Figure 2. L'Occitane cosmetics endorsed by "Luo Tianyi"

Table 4. Analyzing the virtual idol symbol of "Luo Tianyi" with Peirce's semiotics

The symbolic image of "Luo Tianyi" in the L'Occitane brand		
Icon	Index	Symbol
	Materials in cosmetics	Pure Plant Extract
	Flower-like girl's dress	Gentle, comfortable
	Main body color	Natural colors

According to the cultural code brand design methodology (CCBD), the role of cultural codes in the brand Touchpoint design typology, "Luo Tianyi" belongs to Ephemeral Design, Stimulus-response Design and

Stimulus-response Design in L'Occitane's brand communication. The analysis shows that "Luo Tianyi" belongs to Ephemeral Design, Stimulus-response Design and Stimulus-response Design in the brand communication of L'Occitane, and presents three groups of functions in the brand Touchpoint design. It is able to communicate the brand characteristics correctly and effectively.(Table 5)

Table 5. Take the brand Touchpoint design in CCBD

Touchpoint design of "Luo Tianyi" in L'Occitane brand	
Touchpoint Design	Features
Sustainable Design	
Ephemeral Design	Aesthetic diversity in product promotion, for new products short-term promotional functions, short-term image communication, can be changed at any time according to the style, quickly adapt to consumer feedback
Motivation Design	
Stimulus-response Design	Able to meet the psychological needs of consumers, so that the buyer to buy happy and trendy
Soft Subject Design	Presented in a warm, elegant form to bring consumers a sense of well-being
Hard Subject Design	

According to the cultural code brand design methodology (CCBD), the image culture code of "Luo Tian Yi" virtual idol in the brand communication uses the weak level of Tradition Image Representation (TLR), Contemporary Image Representation (CIR), and Futuristic Image Representation (FIR). After weakening the tradition and future, we present the freshness and joy of the brand with modern characteristics, and a design that can communicate with consumers.(Table 6)

Table 6. Image culture code analysis in ccbd

The cultural code for the image of "Luo Tianyi" in the L'Occitane brand		
Image Representation Triad Relationship	Features	Grade
TLR	Cultural Symbols of Chinese Aesthetic Features	weak
CLR	Fresh colors, beautiful illustration style, young and trendy	Strong
FLR	Virtual idol itself is the product of technology, is the embodiment of innovation and avant-garde	weak




Dicos is a fried chicken brand originated in Southern Texas, U.S. In 2019, China's Dicos brand launched a king pistol leg burger, the theme of this new product is a sports theme. The virtual idol "Luo Tianyi" is the

spokesperson of this new product,(Figure 3) wearing a basketball uniform and basketball shoes, wearing a hairband and playing basketball in her hands. It is completely different from the previous image of a fresh, cute girl. Through Peirce's semiotic analysis, we can fully see that virtual idols have the right symbols and meanings for different themes of product promotion.(Table 7)



Figure 3. Products endorsed by "Luo Tianyi" for Dicos

Table 7. Analyzing the virtual idol symbol of "Luo Tianyi" with Peirce's semiotics

The symbolic image of "Luo Tianyi" in the Texaco brand		
Icon	Index	Symbol
	Hair bands used in sports	Fashionable, youthful
	Basketball Jersey	Campaign as the theme
	Play basketball	Lively, healthy

According to the cultural code brand design methodology (CCBD), the role of cultural code in the type of brand touchpoint design, the analysis shows that "Luo Tianyi" belongs to the following three groups in the brand communication of Dicos Ephemeral Design, Stimulus-response Design and Stimulus-response Design, which present the three groups of functions in the Touchpoint design. It plays the role of having the right and effective communication of brand characteristics.(Table 8)

Table 8. Brand touchpoint design analysis in CCBD

Touchpoint design of "Luo Tianyi" in the Texaco brand	
Touchpoint Design	Features
Sustainable Design	
Ephemeral Design	According to the product demand at any time to change the aesthetic characteristics of the product theme for short-term design, for the product theme to shape the short-term image, can be more style and trend replacement, the feedback to consumers can quickly respond
Motivation Design	
Stimulus-response Design	Sports-oriented young people bring a sense of surprise, and a sense of joy
Soft Subject Design	Youthful and sunny vibe for a positive visual effect
Hard Subject Design	

According to the cultural code brand design methodology (CCBD), the image culture code of "Luo Tianyi" virtual idol in the brand communication uses the weak level of Tradition Image Representation (TLR), Contemporary Image Representation (CIR) and Futuristic Image Representation (FIR). After weakening the traditional and futuristic elements, the focus is on the modern design features that are in line with the product theme and can realize friendly communication with consumers.(Table 9)

Table 9. Image culture code analysis in ccbd

The cultural code of "Luo Tianyi" in the Dicos brand		
Image Representation Triad Relationship	Features	Grade
TLR	The Chinese aesthetic elements of "Luo Tianyi" itself	weak
CLR	Sports, basketball and other elements present a sense of movement	Strong
FLR	The identity of the virtual idol presents a sense of the future and technology	weak

5. CONCLUSION

In brand design, virtual idols can interpret and shape brand personality and image in a more diversified and stylized way, and maintain brand quality; in brand operation, they can deeply integrate with social media to strengthen brand emotion and user stickiness, therefore, they are increasingly valued by large enterprises and brands. In the era of Internet integrated marketing communication, the emergence and popularity of virtual idols means the awakening of individual subject consciousness in China and the shift of brand communication discourse from enterprises to audiences. "Luo Tianyi" is a virtual character, but in the process of brand communication, it pays great attention to anthropomorphic emotional communication with the audience. Through online media and offline cross-border marketing channels, the company has successfully spread its high-quality content through the next dimensional wall and greatly enhanced its brand awareness. This paper analyzes the brand communication strategy of the virtual idol "Luo Tianyi", hoping to bring reference value and new ideas for enterprises to use virtual idols for brand communication and the future development of the virtual idol industry.

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