Research Progress and Current Situation of Virtual Idol Spokespersons

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Abstract: *In the digital era, advanced technologies such as big data, metaverse, and virtual idols have made significant contributions to destination branding and promotion in tourism. This paper utilizes a literature collection method to search for relevant documents on virtual idols, virtual spokespersons, Virtual idol spokespersons, and virtual idol spokespersons on domestic and international academic platforms such as CNKI, WanFang, WPCS, Web of Science, and Elsevier. Over 100 relevant documents were collected. Based on this, the collected literature is further organized and summarized to clarify the research context of Virtual idol spokespersons, summarize previous research achievements, and conduct a literature review. The results indicate that scholars have mainly explored the formation background, typology, and the effect of Virtual idol spokespersons. Empirical testing on the effects of Virtual idol spokespersons is insufficient, with predominant studies emphasizing commercial value from an enterprise perspective and overlooking potential social benefits. Our findings contribute to scholars' understanding of the research context of Virtual idol spokespersons, offering novel ideas and perspectives in this domain.*
Keywords: *Virtual idol; Research progress; Current situation; Typology; Effect*

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I.   INTRODUCTION

1.1 Empowering the High-Quality Development of the Cultural and Tourism Industry with 'Numbers'

In March 2021, the "14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035" repeatedly mentioned key terms such as "smart tourism" and "artificial intelligence", unequivocally acknowledging the important role of artificial intelligence in promoting high-quality development of the industry. In August 2022, Leshan issued the "14th Five-Year Plan for Digital Government of Leshan City", with a primary focus on the development theme of "promoting tourism and strengthening the city through industry" to implement the digital economy empowerment upgrade project, and empowering industries such as industry, education, tourism, and data security with digital technology.

In October 2022, the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China further proposed: "Accelerate the development of the digital economy and promote the deep integration of the digital economy and the real economy." As a world cultural and natural heritage tourist destination, how can Leshan quickly integrate digital technology into the traditional cultural and tourism industry, deeply cultivate its rich cultural and tourism resources, reconstruct industry forms, and accelerate the emergence of new products, formats, and models in the cultural and tourism industry? It seems to be a new issue worthy of in-depth exploration and contemplation.

1.2 Virtual idols provide new ideas for promoting tourism destination brands

The favorable national policies provide a sustained internal impetus for the application of digital technology in the cultural and tourism industry. In the digital intelligence era, the emergence of keywords such as artificial intelligence, big data mining, cloud computing, metaverse, and virtual idols has provided a broader marketing perspective and a more stable marketing flow for brand marketing and promotion for local enterprises in tourist destinations. The innovation and development of digital virtual imaging technology not only allows cultural and tourism enterprises to invite virtual internet celebrities with large existing IP traffic to promote and endorse tourist destinations, but also enables them to customize, independently research and develop, and personalize exclusive virtual idol spokespersons based on the local characteristics of tourist destinations and the stylistic elements of tourism products. The strategies and methods of brand marketing and promotion in cultural and tourism enterprises are also more intelligent.

Virtual idol spokespersons do not contain concerns related to personal behavior and moral issues, such as moral corruption. For cultural and tourism enterprises, as well as tourist destinations, Virtual idol spokespersons seem to be the best choice for brand spokespersons. Virtual idol spokespersons can not only apply artificial intelligence technology to the field of brand marketing reasonably and legally under the background of national policy support but also cater to the diverse needs of young consumers, attract new customers, and promote the vigorous development of the local cultural and entertainment industry and tourism industry.

1.3 **The drawbacks of traditional celebrity endorsements in the cultural and tourism sector**

Traditional celebrity endorsements often utilize well-known actors and entertainment stars. However, with the successive scandals involving celebrities such as *Fan Mou Bing, Zheng Mou Shuang, Zheng Mou Lun, Li Mou Feng, and Wu Mou Fan*, the meticulously crafted public image of these artists has collapsed. Not only does the government take comprehensive action to remove their works from circulation, but the brands they endorse also suffer severe damage to their reputation. Nevertheless, the sales and revenue of branded products are closely tied to the personal behavior and reputation of the endorsing celebrity, experiencing success or loss together. Therefore, how to enhance the stability of brand endorsements and the sustainability of brand marketing and promotional activities has become a topic of consideration and exploration for many companies today." Currently, various industries such as the cultural and tourism industry and the manufacturing industry have chosen Virtual idol spokespersons instead of traditional celebrity endorsements, aiming to minimize the uncertainty and risks associated with celebrity endorsements.

II. VIRTUAL IDOL SPOKESPERSONS CLASSIFICATION

Virtual idol spokespersons refer to a comprehensive analysis conducted by companies regarding the external market objective environment and internal resource allocation. Based on the characteristics of the brand, a two-dimensional or three-dimensional cartoon animation image or a character that does not exist but has a similar appearance and shape to a real person is fictionalized as the spokesperson. This is done to meet the brand's need to convey information to consumers and promote new products (Cheng et al., 2021; Li, 2016).

Regarding the categorization of virtual idol spokespersons, scholars have conducted explorations and analyses from different research perspectives. Based on the degree of similarity between virtual idols and real celebrities, Virtual idol spokespersons can be divided into two types: celebrity-like virtual idols and original virtual idols (Brown, 2014; Park et al., 2021). From the perspective of constructing brand personification, Virtual idol spokespersons can be classified into three categories: those based on the brand's unique attributes, those designed based on aesthetic appearance, and those created based on animation or literary works (Wang, 2022). From the aspects of Virtual idol spokesperson's image, quantity, ownership, and promotion methods, they can be further categorized into four types. (1) Based on the difference in image, Virtual idol spokespersons can be divided into two forms: anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic. The non-anthropomorphic form includes cartoon characters, fantasy roles, and product personification, among others. (2) From a quantitative perspective, Virtual idol spokespersons can be categorized as either single Virtual idol spokespersons or group multi-role Virtual idol spokespersons. (3) From an ownership perspective, they can be further classified as custom-made virtual idols for enterprises or authorized virtual idols representing third parties. (4) from a promotional perspective, Virtual idol spokespersons can be classified as active or passive. Active virtual idols endorse products and demonstrate their functions and usage through methods such as oral endorsements and product demonstrations, while passive virtual idols serve as symbolic brand icons or symbols, appearing only on product packaging, such as "KFC" and "Starbucks" (Zheng, 2015).

Through combing and summarizing, we have found that the evolution and classification of Virtual Idol Spokespersons can be roughly divided into four stages: (1) Symbolic emblem stage, mainly consisting of patterns and symbolic badges of traditional enterprises and old brand names, such as "KFC's white-bearded old man," "Starbucks' mermaid," etc.; (2) Cartoon character stage, mainly featuring Disney-produced animations, with characters like "Winnie the Pooh," "Donald Duck," "Mickey and Minnie Mouse," etc.; (3) Anime character stage, mainly extending from anime characters, with holographic projections like "Hatsune Miku" as the main focus; (4) Virtual idol stage, mainly referring to virtual images developed, designed, and produced using CGI simulation technology (Cheng, 2021), with virtual singers like "Luo Tianyi" and Watsons' "Watson Xi" as the main representatives.

III. THE EFFECT OF VIRTUAL IDOL SPOKESPERSONS

3.1. The brand level

Virtual idol spokespersons enhance the target market's recognition of the brand and help the brand stand out among competitors, thereby achieving differentiation in competitive strategies. Empirical evidence from Garrenston and Burton (2005) explores the relationships between the proximity of Virtual idol spokespersons to endorsed brands and brand assets. Findings show that the greater relevance between Virtual idol spokespersons and endorsed brands leads to a stronger positive effect on the enterprise's brand assets. Other scholars further confirm the above conclusion, demonstrating that the more unique and distinct the Virtual idol spokespersons image is, and the more closely it is associated with the brand attributes, the more likely it is to evoke brand associations and memories in consumers, thereby generating brand resonance and identification (Wang, 2004; Fink et al., 2012).

The highly correlated relationship between Virtual idol spokespersons and the special attributes of a brand, as well as the personification of Virtual idol spokespersons, fosters consumer empathy in cuteness, warm, and heartwarming ways, thereby deepening their understanding and perception of the brand, further strengthening the connection and emotional bond between consumers and the brand, generating a sense of identification with the brand, and significantly enhancing the brand's assets (Garretson and Burton, 2005; Lebel and Cooke, 2008; Lin and Wang, 2012). The endorsement of virtual idol cartoon characters can also enhance consumers' perception of the quality of the brand's products by evoking fond memories (Neely et al., 2004; Zhang, 2013). Especially when companies choose cartoon characters or virtual idols that their target audience prefers, consumers unconsciously transfer the positive emotions brought by the cartoon image of the endorsing brand to the brand's products, thereby significantly enhancing the experiential value of the brand for the target audience (Choi, 2001; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Geng, 2011).

Research also indicates that Virtual idol spokespersons can significantly improve consumers' attitudes toward brands. Virtual idol spokespersons enhance emotional connections between idols, fans, and communities through various means such as social media interactions, holographic concerts, and birthday parties. This strengthens the bond and ultimately generates a fan community effect. Through fan worship and support from fan clubs, a tripartite relationship among consumers, Virtual idol spokespersons, and brands are formed, creating a three-dimensional value co-creation model. This model ultimately enhances brand cultural value and accumulates brand assets (Wang, 2022).

3.2 The consumer level

If companies introduce Virtual idol spokespersons, it can help the target audience form a deep impression of the brand. This impression, due to the characteristics of Virtual idol spokespersons, will affect consumer brand trust, thereby influencing the target audience's brand loyalty and purchase intention (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004). Other scholars' research has also found that the characteristics of Virtual idol spokespersons, such as attractiveness, expertise, and relevance, significantly impact consumer brand satisfaction and can even strengthen the marketing effectiveness of online sales channels for companies, enhancing consumer brand loyalty (Holzwarth, 2006).

When the personality of a Virtual idol spokespersons matches the brand characteristics, a tacit linkage is formed between the recognition of the spokesperson's role and the perception of brand quality. Consumers will involuntarily associate their purchasing behavior with the enterprise brand, thereby enhancing their perception of the brand's quality (Wang, 2007). Furthermore, consumer individual attributes also moderate the impact of Virtual idol spokespersons on consumers' psychological and behavioral outcomes. For example, among male and female consumers, female consumers have stronger perception and empathy abilities, therefore possessing more emotional traits. As a result, Virtual idol spokespersons have a more significant positive impact on the brand attitude and purchase intention of female consumers (Lin and Wang, 2012). On the other hand, some scholars believe that Virtual idol spokespersons with humorous characteristics are more capable of alleviating work pressure for male consumers, making them more favored by male consumers. Therefore, the relationships between Virtual idol spokespersons and brand recall, as well as brand association, are more prominent among male consumers (Zhang, 2013).

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in the field of public opinion shows that consumers pay more attention to negative information than positive information (Hu et al., 2020; Xiong and Qian, 2012). The negative coverage of brand spokespersons undermines the brand's assets, nullifying the long-term efforts of the company (Cui and Fu, 2002). Therefore, driven by digital technology and utilizing high-tech tools such as artificial intelligence and virtual idols, Virtual idol spokespersons have become the optimal solution for brand endorsements. As early as the 1990s, scholars have explored and researched virtual idol spokespersons (Callcott and Phillips, 1996).

Furthermore, with rapid technological development and improved manufacturing processes, the birth of virtual idols has injected a constant stream of innovation into the flourishing development of virtual spokespersons. Although virtual idols have already revitalized the entertainment industry, reception services industry, cultural tourism industry, and marketing field, continuously applied to brand, product, and tourist destination endorsements, research on virtual idol spokespersons is still insufficient.

Currently, scholars have conducted extensive research on the background, classification, and the effect of virtual idol spokespersons. However, there is a lack of empirical testing on the impact of Virtual Idol Spokespersons, and most of the research is conducted from the perspective of companies, focusing on exploring their commercial value, while neglecting the social benefits of Virtual idol spokespersons. Scholars have mostly studied virtual idol spokespersons as a whole, without exploring the mechanisms and boundaries of their roles and effects in a detailed manner. In other words, current scholars only consider Virtual idol spokespersons as a general entity, without delving into their segmentation and refinement in terms of the applicability to different product types and the strength of the influence relationship with different brand types.

This article attempts to summarize the research findings on Virtual idol spokespersons and clarify the research framework of Virtual idol spokespersons, in order to provide new research ideas and perspectives for future studies on the impact mechanism of Virtual idol spokespersons.

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