

# The Influence of Virtual Spokesmen Based on Para-social Interaction Theory

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**Abstract.** With the increasing maturity of the technology, the rise of Generation Z, and the expansion of the influence of the metaverse concept, virtual idols gradually enter reality, especially the real marketing scene. The virtual spokesperson is the IP image of the brand gradually has its content, scene, worldview, and culture. More and more companies release their virtual spokesperson, but the previous research only focused on virtual idols, and there are certain differences between virtual idols and virtual spokesperson. This research was designed to analyze the reasons for virtual spokespersons' current low appeal, and this paper took Miss Lai, the virtual spokesperson of L'Oréal, as an example, and utilized the SWOT analysis method and para-social relationship theory to analyze her current behavior. This study concluded that Miss Lai's image is not vivid enough so Miss Lai cannot become the "ideal self" of the audience and cannot enable the audience to simulate her as a character, thus Miss Lai cannot build para-social relationships with audiences.

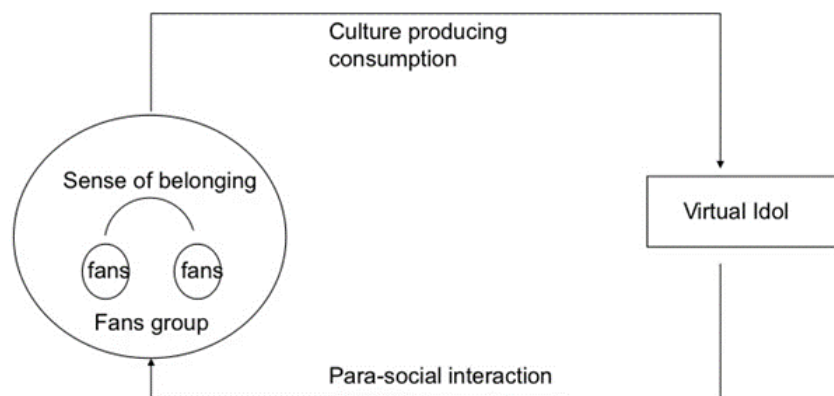
**Keywords:** Virtual spokesperson; para-social relationship; Digital marketing.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

In 2021, the increasing maturity of technology, the rise of target groups of Generation Z, and the expansion of the influence of Metaverse pave the way for virtual idols to enter reality, especially the real scene of marketing.

In broad themes, "Virtual Idol is the new dissemination medium with own relationship and the extension of strong-ties between human" [1]. Guided by the interaction mechanism between virtual idols and fan groups as Figure 1, the brand attracts fans' attention with the virtual idol, and finally transforms them into consumption. With the influence of virtual idols, content and products can enter the target audience more quickly. In the era of Internet artificial intelligence, virtual idols carry a new algorithm based on using the relationship as the logic, which can help the marketer to find the target customer more easily.



**Figure 1.** Interaction mechanism between virtual idols and fan groups [2].

At the same time, the target customer is also more willing to accept the content related to their favorite virtual idols because of the relationship bonus; according to the "2021 China Virtual Idol Consumer Market Research Report" released by Juzcar, even though only 15.64% of consumers

surveyed are familiar with and have their favorite virtual idols, 62.31% of consumers surveyed are likely to pay for the products endorsed by virtual idols, and 9.78% of consumers surveyed will choose to pay, which shows the great prospect of the virtual idol industry [3]. At the same time, more and more companies, especially beauty makeup, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), fashion, and other brands popular with young people, try to cooperate with virtual idols or launch their virtual spokesperson.

Recently, a lot of research has focused on the virtual idol, in 2019, H Kobayashi and T Taguchi utilized Hatsune Miku as an example to explore how will Consumer Generated Media (CGM) and User Generated Content (UGC) diffuse and spread and what are the factors that affect such spreading and diffusion process [4]. In 2020, Lu and Yu take the virtual idol Luo Tianyi and their fans as the research objects to investigate the current virtual idol's consumption activities from the creation of the virtual idol consumption value, the characteristics of the fans' consumption culture, and the cultural significance behind the fans' consumption behavior [5]. In 2021, Yue and Wang take "Luo Tianyi", the most mature virtual idol in China, as an example and utilize the Text Analysis Method to explore how the advertising strategy of virtual idols obtain the psychological identity of the audience [6].

## 1.2 Research Gap

Together, these studies outline how to establish or enhance the consumption value of virtual idols with an existing fan base, however, no one pays much attention to virtual spokespersons launched by the company itself without a fan base, but virtual spokespersons are more flexible and controllable for companies. Brand self-built virtual spokespersons can find a new carrier for brand anthropic communication through the development of science and technology, virtual spokespersons are the medium of communication with consumers, through which brands need to provide consumers with rich nourishment such as brand personality and valuable information to meet consumers' interests [7].

Recently, more and more companies launch their spokesperson, for example, in 2019, SK-II launched the virtual model YUMI in cooperation with AI company Soul Machine; in 2020, L'Oréal launched Miss Lai; in March 2022, LVMH Group announced the first virtual ambassador of the Metaverse.

However, many companies' virtual spokesperson has failed to realize their goal. According to Juzcar's "2021 China Virtual Idol Consumer Market Research Report", the respondents who pay attention to virtual singers accounted for 80.68% of total respondents, while the respondents who pay attention to virtual spokespersons were less than 8.43% [3]. L'Oréal virtual spokesperson Miss Lai, defined as a public relationship (PR) affairs spokesperson and a good partner of consumers, Miss Lai is responsible for the "Say Worry" column on WeChat, discussing with consumers around hot topics, and exploring the most real feelings and thoughts of the current consumers together, but the "like" number of each article in the column is less than 100, did not attract the attention from the majority of consumers.

Therefore, how to improve the ability of the company's virtual spokespersons to attract fans should be paid attention to, and to find the method of improving the ability of virtual spokespeople to attract fans, the reasons for their current low appeal should be analyzed.

## 1.3 Structure of The Paper

This research plan will take L'Oréal's virtual spokesperson "Miss Lai" as an example to give an account of the reason for the low influence of virtual spokespersons by SWOT analysis, then put forward the image of developing virtual spokesperson based on that from three-dimensionality of brand personality, spokespersons' quality and fans demand.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition

Horton and Wohl suggested that para-social interaction or relationship takes place between media audiences and television performers when people are repeatedly exposed to media persona [8]. When Horton and Wohl proposed the concept of parasocial interaction, they distinguished the difference between para-social interaction and para-social relationship. They directly define the long-distance intimate relations between the audience and the performer like face-to-face relations as a para-social relationship, para-social interaction emphasizes reciprocal action or effect.

There are two controversial points in the field of "para-social interaction" research, namely the "deficiency paradigm" and "global-use paradigm". The deficiency paradigm is thought that there is a basic need within the individual-the need for social interaction, and when interpersonal interaction in the real world cannot meet this need, people seek media to meet this need, which results in a para-social interaction; some studies also suggest that lonely people tend to spend more time for the media to decrease their negative emotions attributed by loneliness [9].

Global-use paradigm is asserted that para-social interaction comes from the more common emotional connection between the audience and the media figures, rather than from seeking compensation [10]. Moreover, the para-social interaction and the channels of face-to-face communication between the audience and the media figures are not mutually exclusive, but mutually complementary [10].

Since the late 1970s, the study of "para-social interaction" has jumped out of the shackles of the controversial dualism between the "deficiency paradigm" and "global-use paradigm", and turned into a more practical and operational field; most "para-social interaction" studies adopt the psychometric paradigm of "uses and gratifications approach", which incorporate para-social interaction together with other behavioral variables into mathematical models of forecasting of media usage.

### 2.2 Important Results

According to Horton and Wohl, three factors may explain the variance in most of the "para-social interactions" studies, namely friendship, understanding, and identification [11]. Firstly, friendship refers to "a mutual relationship that is characterized by intimacy and liking" [11]. It can explain many items, such as "I feel like a part of the group". Secondly, understanding refers to "the degree to which a fan asserts that he or she knows the celebrity personally and profoundly" [11]. Thirdly, identification refers to "a process of social influence through which an individual adopts attitudes or behaviors of another when there are clear benefits associated with such adoption" [11].

The para-social interactions factors mainly come from three aspects: psychological factors, such as loneliness and attraction, motivation factors like media use motivation, and individual differences, such as attachment style [12].

McCroskey and McCain illustrate three types of attraction, namely, body attraction mainly refers to the degree of attraction to individual external characteristics, social attraction refers to a certain degree of popularity, and task attraction is the degree of the task attraction of the individual [13]. The results of the Rubin and McHugh study found that all three types of attraction were positively correlated with para-social interactions, and the positive correlation between task attraction and social attraction and para-social interactions was stronger [14].

Some researchers also explored whether the individual's motivation of using affects the formation of para-social interaction, these studies found that when individuals want to obtain information through media or seek social utility, rather than just for their habits or pastime, will be more likely to yield the para-social interaction between the audience and media figures [15].

Researchers noticed that some people may be more likely than others to yield para-social communication, research found that anxious-ambivalent people are most likely to develop the para-social relationship, followed by insecurity attachment, moreover is secure, the least likely to develop

a para-social relationship is avoidant, this is mainly due to avoidant cannot trust any relationship, including para-social relationship [16].

For the para-social relationship, there is not a kind of real interaction and conversation, but only an imaginary and one-way para-social relationship generated by the audience after watching the performances of the media. To ensure that users can better develop their imagination and establish relationships, the media figures will induce the audience to generate the image of relevant types of relationships through the imitation of certain social behaviors, which means that the performance of a media figures is an objective imitation of the characteristics of a certain character. In the behavior imitation, the audience is implied to imagine the media figures as the character imitated. Therefore, both the performance of media figures and the para-social imagination of the audience are based on the that both of them have the perception of the attributes and characteristics of the "interactive" characters, and then the specific types of para-social relationships conversely become the infrastructure of the follow-up communication motivation, interaction choice, and interpretation of media users [17].

### 2.3 Summary

Para-social relationships will make consumers more likely to consume [18]. para-social interaction is the reason why fans follow idols and pay for the products endorsed by virtual idols, so it is necessary to establish para-social interactions. Meanwhile, all of the studies reviewed here support the hypothesis that building friendship, understanding, and identification is important for the establishment of para-social interactions, it means media figures should be "ideal self" or build up a fantasy relationship with fans and psychological factors, motivation factors and individual differences can promote the development of them, media figures can create a face-to-face interactive atmosphere and the imitate certain social behaviors to induce the audience's imagination about relevant types of relationships to meet emotional needs and develop the friendship and understanding between media figures and audiences, then the role of identification can be played when the number of media figures' fans reach a certain scale.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research Design

In order to clarify Miss Lai's current advantages and disadvantages, the SWOT model was utilized to analyze the Miss Lai of L'Oréal, and para-social interaction will be utilized to analyze the difference between Miss Lai and traditional virtual idols and the difference between Miss Lai and traditional IP images.

### 3.2 Miss Lai

L'Oréal is a leader in the beauty industry, with a business scope of more than 130 countries and regions, it is one of the Fortune Global Top 500 Enterprises. On June 8th, 2016, L'Oréal ranked 36th on the Brand Global Top 100 Most Valuable Brands in 2016 [19]. On July 19, 2018, L'Oreal was ranked 392 on the Fortune World 500 List [20]. In December 2018, L'Oréal was listed in The World's 500 Most Influential Brands [21]. In July 2019, L'Oréal ranked 396 on the Fortune World 500 List [22]. On May 13, 2020, L'Oréal was ranked 176th on Forbes Global 2000 at 2020 [23]. In 2022, L'Oréal ranks 53rd in Interbrand's Best Global Brands [24].

In the past, a brand's virtual IP image was an image symbol such as a mascot, now, under the influence of various kinds of authorization and cross-border cooperation, especially, the new generation becomes the main consumer group, the IP image of the brand gradually has its content, scene, world view, and culture. In particular, after the emergence of the word "Avatar", the brand IP mascots, whether in cartoon form or AI virtual form, are turned in the digital times into IP characters: A character with an independent personality, thought, behavior, and world view, one that has advantages and disadvantages, has the joys and sorrows, has the unknown future, one that can explore,

grow, empower, and can create a new life with fans beyond the current life, L'Oréal's virtual spokesperson "Miss Lai" complies with the changing trend. She is a rising dimension from IP image to "IP role", which is a change from static notification to dynamic interaction, and it is from the spread of the point, line, and surface to the comprehensive construction of the three-dimensional communication system.

Miss Lai is defined as a public relationship (PR) affairs spokesperson and a good partner with consumers, Miss Lai is responsible for the "Say Worry" column on WeChat, discussing with consumers about hot topics, and exploring the most real feelings and thoughts of the current consumers together. However, Miss Lai is popularized by the strong and famous L'Oréal company, while complying with the change of virtual IP image, but it did not get the attention of fans, which is worth exploring.

### 3.3 SWOT Analysis

#### 3.3.1 Strength

The audience can connect the distinctive personality of the spokesperson with the distinctive personality of the brand [25]. L'Oréal Group chose to establish the virtual spokesperson with the history and vision of the group. Eugène, founder of L'Oréal, his fascination with chemistry led him to the field of hair dye, and within three years he had his first invention patent, a new non-toxic hair dye, and He named it "L'Oréal", etymologically for the Greek "Orea", implying beauty [26]. After the First World War, more and more women had the opportunity to enter the workplace, and they want to cover up their white hair by dyeing their hair to boost their confidence, Eugène's non-toxic hair dye has become popular, helping a large group of new professional women regains confidence. In order to commemorate Eugène, convey the vision of bringing beauty to everyone, and break the stereotype that beauty is only related to women, the L'Oréal group decided to launch two virtual spokespersons at the same time, "Miss Lai" and "Mr. Ou" are born.

The appearance and dress-up of "Miss Lai" are shown in Figure 2, the appearance and dress-up of "Miss Lai" and "Mr. Ou" are in line with the aesthetic of young people, and both have multiple professional identities, so they appear as images closer to young people's aesthetic appreciation and life behavior, which can reduce the resistance of young consumers and communicate better with them.



**Figure 2.** The appearance and dress up of Miss Lai [27]

In addition, L'Oréal China has adopted an interactive new product release format that is currently very popular among young people, such as "video link", Figure 3 shows an example of it, with the video phone interaction between "Miss Lai" and "Mr. Ou" as the beginning, very naturally leads to the introduction of the Kiehl's new product launch activities. This kind of content based on familiar life scenes and the reading habits of customers can effectively improve the correlation between content and readers and obtain a better communication effect.



Figure 3. Video phone interaction between Miss Lai and Mr. Ou [28]

Every day, Miss Lai interacts deeply with consumers in the L'Oréal private community, listening to their voices as friends. Miss Lai sometimes creates content with fans. For example, as figure 4 shows, before the official tweet is released, Miss Lai will post the candidate title in a group chat to invite fans to vote on the title they like. When creating content, the team also gets insight from the fan base and finds content communication perspectives. Through this interaction, Miss Lai can find content that best meets the needs of customers.

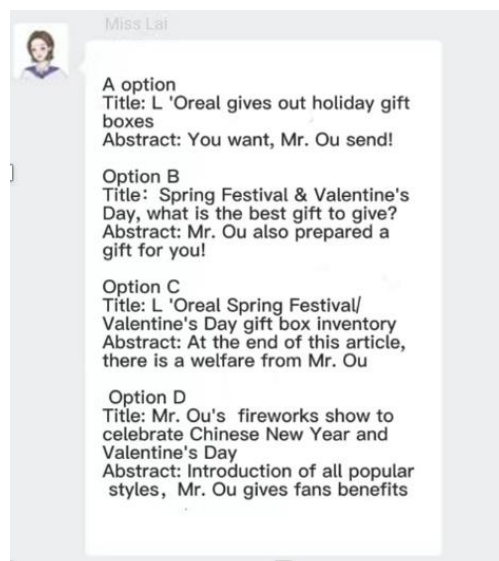


Figure 4. Miss Lai posts the candidate title in a group chat to invite fans vote [7].

### 3.3.2 Weakness

The relationship between a virtual idol and fans is not a one-way worship relationship, but a two-way value transfer, virtual spokesperson needs to provide emotional value to fans, for example, by creating a face interactive atmosphere to meet the social needs of fans, or playing a role to induce the audience to have related associations. Miss Lai currently communicates with fans through group chat interaction and the column "Say Worry", but it mainly is the output of the content, but lack of emotional interaction, for example, the July 2021 article in the column "Say Worry" about the power of women received only 58 likes.

### 3.3.3 Opportunities

With the advent of the 5G era, disruptive scenarios may appear in various areas of life, not only the mobile phone screen, all planes may become the screen in the future, and the trend of fragmentation and visualization of information will intensify, the way that people recognize things will once again undergo a fundamental change, demand for concrete content will explode [7]. In such a general trend, the media communication mode with text as the main information carrier no longer has advantages, it is difficult to seize the scarce resources such as the attention of the younger generation of consumers. For brands, it is an urgent task to visualize the brand image and promote the innovation of information carrying mode. The self-built visual spokesperson is one of the solutions.

As an Internet native, Generation Z is used to meeting their needs for companionship, interaction, and entertainment in the virtual world. Developed based on Vocaloid, Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), Holographic Projection, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, virtual idols have rich forms and functions and can be active in all kinds of entertainment media and scenes. From the perspective of technology development trends, virtual idols have a wide range of application scenarios. The success of Hatsune Miku and Vtuber also demonstrates that humans can establish extraordinary emotional connections with virtual idols.

### 3.3.4 Threatens

More companies launched virtual idols and virtual spokespeople, compared with the virtual idol, the virtual spokesperson has certain limitations, virtual idol fans can participate in the production of idol works, and the feeling of "Accompany growth" and "Pay" can let fans invest more emotion and money to the idols. What is more, virtual idols are also more interactive than a virtual spokesperson, such as virtual idol group A-SOUL fans said, A-SOUL often interacts with its fans, playing the popular online game, and the idols will also chat with their fans online, after in-depth understanding, he found that idols personality is attractive, and there is no generation gap in the chat, it's very interesting, over time, he began to get used to having their company [29]. Due to the limitation of responsibility of a brand image transmission, a virtual spokesperson cannot communicate with fans without limitations, so there is a certain distance between fans and the virtual spokesperson.

Fans' love for their idols can also be seen as a process of making up for their regrets and shortcomings. American humanistic psychologist Rogers put forward two concepts of the self: one is the real self, and the other is the ideal self. The ideal self is the self-concept that an individual wants to have. When there is a certain gap between the real self and the ideal self, people usually exploit some ways to make up for their regrets and shortcomings. One of these compensatory external manifestations is the devotion of love and worship to the stars with qualities that they cannot get or desire to get. It is more difficult for a virtual spokesperson to make fans feel a "Desire to be them" than virtual idols and real idols.

## 4. Results and Discussion

In an era when messages appealing to emotional and personal beliefs fill the screens, consumers increasingly need brands to provide meaningful, extremely granular, and credible information as references to help them understand the world and make consumer decisions. Miss Lai is an innovative attempt in the field of public relations. This represents that L'Oréal Group is innovating the way it

communicates with the media and consumers, L'Oréal Group communicates more effectively with the outside world by introducing concrete visual images and content forms more in line with contemporary content consumption habits.

According to Rubin and McHugh, body attraction is positively correlated with para-social interactions [14]. Miss Lai's images are closer to young people's aesthetic appreciation and life behavior, which can help to build the para-social relationship between Miss Lai and her fans. In addition, Miss Lai has accumulated fans by releasing official tweets, which has demonstrated that when individuals want to obtain information through media or seek social utility will be more likely to yield para-social interaction.

According to para-social interaction theory, media figures need to try to create a face-to-face interactive atmosphere, scenes, character posture, and conversation content are served for this purpose, to establish and maintain a close social relationship with the audience—such as friends, comforters, role models. Miss Lai has narrowed her distance from her fans by imitating behaviors, such as WeChat interaction. Nonetheless, Miss Lai lacks the emotional output that can make herself become the "ideal self" of the audience or enable the audience to stimulate her into a character.

## 5. Conclusion

A virtual spokesperson with the support of large companies did not realize the purpose of attracting fans and transforming them into consumption. However, the previous research did not focus on the virtual spokesperson of enterprises, but only focused on virtual idols, and there are certain differences between virtual idols and virtual spokespeople, hence, the reasons for virtual spokespersons' current low appeal should be analyzed.

By summarizing the literature of previous predecessors, it can be concluded that virtual idols who want to establish a para-social relationship with fans need to imitate certain social behavior so that fans can associate them as friends, comforters, and role models.

Through the SWOT analysis of Miss Lai, and using the theory of para-social interactions, the reason for the current low influence of Miss Lai can be concluded as follows: Miss Lai did not become the "ideal self" of the audience or did not enable the audience to stimulate her into a character. For this reason, and combined with the characteristics of virtual idols that need to convey the brand concept, Miss Lai can set its goal to be friends of fans to strengthen the trust of fans or become an "ideal self" to play the role of "identification", and L'Oréal can Make an image of Miss Lai vivid by sharing her life and enriching her stories, such as L'Oréal can build Miss Lai's social account in social media or post Miss Lai's story comics. Miss Lai can publish the brand concept in the process of chatting and sharing on the social platform, or convey the brand concept from one of Miss Lai's actions or words in the cartoon, to gain more people's identity with the concept, so as to accumulate fans.

This study fills the gap in the research of virtual idol spokesperson, Admittedly, the article mainly utilizes qualitative indicators and has subjective factors, thus, in the future, the influence of each behavior of a virtual spokesperson on the results can be quantitatively analyzed from a quantitative perspective.

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