

Virtual Interaction Creates Parasocial Interaction: The Effectiveness of Intellectual Property (IP) Characters on Consumers' Emotional Connections

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Abstract. Intellectual property (IP) characters refer to legally protected character property created and designed by humans. With the development of the Internet, social media is becoming increasingly involved in people's everyday lives and gradually becoming a normal lifestyle they rely on. In order to benefit from virtual social and emotional relationships, many brands have adopted the approach of developing IP personas and giving them more stages to increase their interaction with customers through social media platforms. This paper aimed to combine two theories: parasocial interaction and emotional marketing, to investigate whether virtual interactions conducted by IP characters on video media platforms can bring emotional value to consumers. Using the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the brand LINE FRIENDS, the article concluded that IP characters create parasocial interactions with viewers through virtual interaction and thus create an emotional connection. At the same time, it also allowed readers to see the emotional needs of the times behind the rapid development of the IP character industry.

Keywords: Parasocial Interaction, Emotional Marketing, LINE FRIENDS, Intellectual property (IP) characters, social media.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

"We lived on farms and then we lived in cities, and now we're going to live on the Internet!" Here is a line from the movie *Social Network*, released in 2010 [1]. In the current world, the latter half of the sentence is no longer in the future tense. Humans have already lived, or are living, on the Internet. In this vast system, social media is becoming more and more influential in people's lives. More precisely, 350K tweets are sent, 694K TikTok videos and 3.47MM YouTube videos are watched, and 41K clicks on Instagram sponsored posts are made every minute of the day [2]. These data demonstrate the increasing engagement of social networks in human life and the energy and time people invest in social media. For young people, in particular, social media is their primary channel of access to information. The data shows that 34 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds are concerned about missing out on information if they cannot use social media, and 22 percent feel anxious and uncomfortable about not being able to view information [3]. Thus, it can be concluded that the use of social media has become a way of life that humans, especially young people, rely on.

However, the commercial profit potential behind this dependency on social media has been identified and quickly grasped by countless brands, even extending the term "social media branding" for more profound research. Brands will create accounts on different social media platforms and create a dialogue with their target audience through different activities designed for them. The combination of intellectual property (IP) roles and new media is a highlighted trend among the many design solutions. According to the research of the Tencent Internet Social User Experience (ISUX) team, the mainstream of IP characters has expanded from the popularly known animation, manga, and game characters such as Mario, Barbie, and Winnie the Pooh to two more categories: "Online Messenger Characters" such as Kakao and Line, and "Artist brand Characters" such as Super Fiction

[4]. This development reflects that more brands choose to apply IP characters to connect with their target audience. However, social media platforms, especially video platforms like YouTube and TikTok, have become the biggest stage for IP character interaction. There are many ways to generate virtual conversations on video platforms. For example, IP personas will make popular video genres on social media, such as vlogs, makeup routines, food Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), workouts, et cetera. Here are more specific examples: Figure 1 is a vlog video uploaded on Barbie's YouTube channel. Barbie shows her audience a rich and colorful day in this vlog, including diet, hobbies, sports, relationships, and beauty. [5]. Moreover, Figure 2 is a Nachos-eating ASMR video uploaded on the BT21 channel for the character RJ [6]. Through these videos, the IP character is no longer just a flat design but becomes a three-dimensional being.



#Barbie #BarbieVlogs #PACE
@Barbie | Barbie: A Day in the Life | Barbie Vlogs

Fig. 1 Barbie's Saturday Vlog [5]



#BT21
[BT21] MUKBANG - CRISP NACHO EATING SHOW ASMR

Fig. 2 RJ's Food ASMR [6]

Among the numerous brands using IP characters for promotion, Line Friends (Brand Name: LINE FRIENDS) is an active and representative brand in the market today. LINE FRIENDS is a character

brand developed based on the character stickers designed by Korean designer Kang Byeong Mok for the Japanese messaging app Line [7]. Its primary consumers include young people of Generation Z. LINE FRIENDS has a diversified product line that includes eight lines: toys, electronics, household, living, school & office, sports, fashion, and beauty. Moreover, it has two main character lines: LINE FRIENDS' original character family Brown & Friends, and BT21, which was created in collaboration with the K-pop band BTS. LINE FRIENDS has opened YouTube accounts for these two characters' families under the names "LINE FRIENDS" and "BT21", and they have gained much attention. As of September 2022, the LINE FRIENDS channel has 37.7K subscribers, and the BT21 channel has 4.97M subscribers [8,9].

1.2 Research Gap

For LINE FRIENDS and IP character promotion, previous studies include Tencent ISUX's analysis of the development and characteristics of IP characters, Chen, Huarng, and Gonzalez's analysis of the impact of cute characters on consumer intent, and Chang and Kim's case study of LINE FRIENDS' transmedia branding [4,10,11]. Combining what was mentioned above, the reliance on social media and the interactive promotion strategies of IP characters on video platforms, IP characters provide more emotional value to consumers, especially young generations. Can brands provide more emotional value to young consumers through the virtual interaction of IP personas on video platforms? However, this is a vacancy not covered by previous studies.

1.3 Fill The Gap

In this article, it will analyze this question using LINE FRIENDS' example, combining the theory of parasocial interaction and emotional marketing with the SWOT analysis. This article will explore how to meet better the needs of the younger generation for emotional connection.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Parasocial interaction

2.1.1 Theory

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is a concept introduced by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956. It refers to the audience's intimate psychological relationship with the performer through media contact [12]. Even if there is no or limited interaction, the audience will have an illusionary experience of friendship with the performer [12]. According to Horton and Wohl, this is a "simulacrum of conversational give-and-take," in which the audience experiences a kind of repeated exposure to media, such as watching a television program or following a celebrity for an extended period, after which the audience can experience a personal mind connection with the performer [12]. Also, response to the performer's display of persona. So even if viewers know it is an illusion, they are more likely to believe in this emotional connection. In Horton and Anselm Strauss's 1957 study, they again emphasized that PSI is an emotional interaction initiated and guided by the performer's exposure to his or her persona [13]. Like how the word "interaction" is defined as "a kind of action that occurs as two or more objects have an effect upon one another [14]." It is a two-way communication of emotions. The opposite is the definition of parasocial relationship, a one-way emotional response of the audience to the performer [13]. Horton and Wohl do not explain clearly how this concept manifests itself in their article. However, the characteristics of a parasocial relationship represent a long-term, one-way, more permanent emotional connection [13]. Moreover, in 2011, Hartmann and Goldhoorn proposed a further view based on psychology and sociology. They argue that PSI is triggered by some information cues from the performer, such as gestures, eye gaze, etc., that trigger automatic mind-reading activities and create a sense of regular social interaction in the audience [15]. So that the audience, in turn, becomes emotionally connected to the performer.

2.2.1 Important Results

Based on the PSI theory, the first argument is that the display of persona portrayed by IP characters on video platforms gives people the emotional value of trust. Jennifer Golbeck, in her article *You're Not Really Friends with That Internet Celebrity*, mentions that celebrities (or performers) upload intimate details about their daily lives, and sometimes even their private lives, on video platforms [16]. The presentation of these media is casual but usually looks pretty genuine [16]. In essence, this is the standard that people demand when they exchange information with close friends [16]. Thus, it is conceivable that when performers communicate this part of their hidden details to the public cyclically, the audience will gradually and unconsciously trust and agree with their expressions, just like they regularly FaceTime with their friends. Moreover, in the article *Fostering parasocial relationships with celebrities on social media: Implications for celebrity endorsement*, CHUNG and CHO employ SEM model to conclude that, "parasocial relationships mediated the relationships between social media interactions and source trustworthiness [17]." Thus, it is demonstrated that trust connections can be created through the performer's presentation and the audience's media exposure.

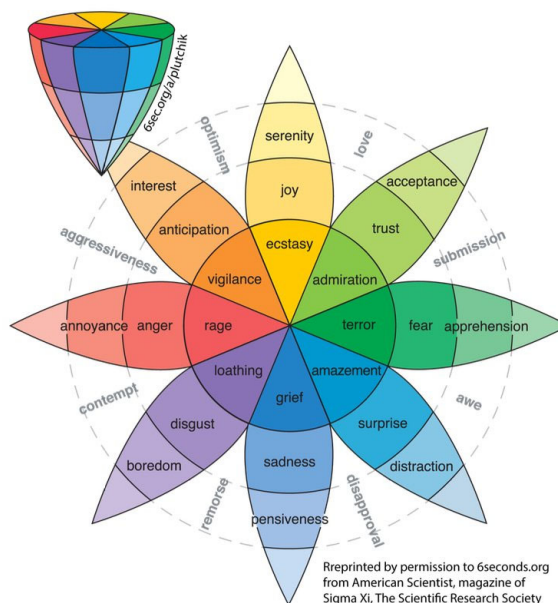
The second argument is that the audience can feel a positive experience of warmth and intimacy through the IP characters' content on the video platform. Leslie Rasmussen suggests that some YouTube beauty celebrities often invite their other celebrity friends to make videos with them, creating a fantastic lifestyle full of happiness and friends [18]. These celebrities create a lifestyle full of happiness and friendships by showing such video content to get viewers' attention and aspirations [18]. Rasmussen also mentions that "YouTube celebrities become friends sharing their opinion [18]." As discussed in the first argument, this type of friendship increases trust and makes viewers feel like they are on the same unit with the performers. Moreover, Chia-LinHsu's 2020 research suggests that "If consumers and vloggers share the same positive brand evaluations, the latter can develop PSI and a sense of belonging [19]." This idea suggests that when the viewer and the performer develop trust, the viewer's sense of belonging also increases, thus feeling the positive emotions conveyed by the video.

2.2 Emotional Marketing

2.1.2 Theory

In 2001, Marc Gobé introduced the concept of "emotional branding" in his book *Emotional Branding: The New Paradigm for Connecting Brands to People*. He argues that there is an emotional connection between consumers and brands [20]. Brands can gain the support and recognition of specific groups by adapting slogans and content [20]. With the expansion of this theory, the concept of emotional marketing emerged, which refers to the use of emotions to mobilize consumers' attention to products [21]. Most companies are becoming aware of the importance of brand image and marketing strategies to guide customers' emotions, which illustrates the importance of emotional values for human beings. What is emotion? Emotions are not simply black or white. They are diverse and complex. Figure 3 is Robert Plutchik's "wheel of emotions," which shows that Plutchik links emotion to color, and emotion is not a point-to-point measure but an interval [22]. However, complex emotions are not confusing, and people naturally classify emotions as they grow and experience them. In his article *Emotions and the Value of Life*, Steven Stosny states, "Most emotions occur in streams that carry value meanings, with built-in motivations to behave according to one's deeper values [23]." Emotions carry the limits set by both law and society, which is why people value them as necessary. The essence of emotional value is that it drives the organism's choices, so the emotional value of the customer has become an essential consideration for the development of both the market and the company.

PLUTCHIK'S WHEEL OF EMOTIONS
 NAME A FEELING & ENHANCE EMOTIONAL LITERACY



SIX SECONDS EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE NETWORK WWW.6SECONDS.ORG

Fig. 3 Wheel of Emotions [22]

2.2.2 Important Results

Based on the study of emotional marketing and emotional value, the argument is that IP characters increase the audience's emotional experience through the video platform's interaction. In Decker's article, she gives the example of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), which plays sad photos and songs when appealing to people for donations [21]. This example demonstrates the reliability of mobilizing people's empathy through visual and auditory interaction. Moreover, in Bernd H. Schmitt's book *Experiential marketing: How to get customers to sense, feel, think, act and relate to your company and brands*, he indicates that, "experiences provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational values that Replace functional values [24]." Functionality is no longer the most significant selling point today. However, the future trend is the ability to understand consumers' psychology and provide them with various emotional experiences.

2.3 Summary

To summarize, there is a close connection between parasocial interaction and emotional marketing. PSI provides an illusory emotional connection. Through the interaction design of the performer or IP persona, people treat the virtual conversation on the virtual platform as an informational symbol of intimacy, thereby negating the falsity of it all and becoming addicted to it. The emotional value provided by this process is what emotional marketing is all about. Via these two theories, the user's emotional needs are satisfied.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This article chose to use Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis to explore how the IP characters, exemplified by LINE FRIENDS, provide emotional value to young people through interactive video media. Because both social media and IP characters are products of the current fast-developing information society, an analysis of the context of the times and the current state of the market is essential to engage in if one wants to dig deeper into the content behind them. The SWOT analysis method is comprehensive in providing a framework for this need. It identifies the research object's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats from the internal and external aspects to evaluate its position and propose a plan for future development [25]. Through a parallel analysis of LINE FRIENDS' internal management factors and external influences, it was possible to see more distinctly the current situation of LINE FRIENDS in terms of applying PSI and emotional marketing to the interactive industry of IP characters and to develop a more suitable direction for the brand based on extensive research and data.

3.2 Research Design

LINE FRIENDS was originally designed by Korean designer Kang Byeong Mok (Mogi) in 2011 as a sticker for the Japanese chat APP Line, which was a brand-new feature at the time [7]. The first character Mogi designed was MOON, a human-like character with more exaggerated and interesting expressions than the designs of the time to help users convey some of their hard-to-express feelings [26]. Then he thought that perhaps friendly and cute animals would make the user experience more enjoyable, so he designed two more characters, BROWN the bear and CONY the rabbit [26]. The brand LINE FRIENDS was later established in 2015 and is managed by Line Friends corporation, a subsidiary of Naver corporation. In 2017, LINE FRIENDS had its first character creation collaboration with the famous Korean boy band BTS. Based on the designs of the group's seven members, eight new IP characters were created for the new character series called BT21, which has since become the second mainstream character line in addition to the original BROWN & FRIENDS character family. Each character is named and given a personality and story background. For example, the character RJ from BT21, who appears in Figure 2, is an alpaca from Machu Picchu, who hates shedding its fur and has a huge passion for eating. Moreover, there are also some unique relationships between the characters. For example, the characters BROWN and CONY from the BROWN & FRIENDS series are a couple. However, LINE FRIENDS characters are not only used as stickers. In recent years, retail, partnership, and content have become the brand's core business [27]. Numerous IP character-centered merchandising products are available for online and offline retailing, making LINE FRIENDS a significant sales force. They have a diversified product line that includes eight parts: toys, electronics, household, living, school & office, sports, fashion, and beauty [28]. Furthermore, through collaboration, IP characters are also increasingly active in the broader range of digital content, such as games, music, and video. Examples include LINE FRIENDS' collaboration with the Brawl Stars game, its partnership with Netflix, et cetera. The expansion of content is mainly through video-based media platforms like YouTube. LINE FRIENDS is the brand's main channel, and they have opened a separate account for BT21 to develop BT21's character content.

3.3 SWOT Analysis

3.3.1 Strength

LINE FRIENDS has substantial competitive advantages in managing and designing virtual interaction of IP characters. First, LINE FRIENDS has a complete story universe for its character families. Through successful IP cases such as Friends, Marvel, and SpongeBob SquarePants, it can be concluded that having a complete and diverse universe of characters is essential for viewers and fans. This is because the audience has a parasocial interaction effect on the emotions between the characters. As Rasmussen pointed out, in the case of some YouTube celebrities, the connection

between performers can lead to a desire for human relationships [18]. Thus, LINE FRIENDS presented a comprehensive view of their character universe through their YouTube channel. Take BT21 as an example: As of September 2022, the "BT21 STORY" section on the BT21 channel has 64 videos uploaded. In these videos, each character's background is first told, such as in Figure 4, which shows the personal story of TATA, a BT21 character. It is an alien prince with magic, but it believes that love is a more powerful force, so it wants to use love to change the world [29]. Then, there are many stories of the characters after they meet. Because TATA wants to change the world with love, it finds friends living all around the earth and finally forms a group called BT21. Figure 5 is a video of two characters from BT21, KOYA the koala and SHOOKY the cookie, having a heart-to-heart talk under the stars [30]. This daily interactive display allows consumers to receive warm emotions and project such scenes into their immediate environment, thus further strengthening their sense of intimacy and connection to the characters on screen.

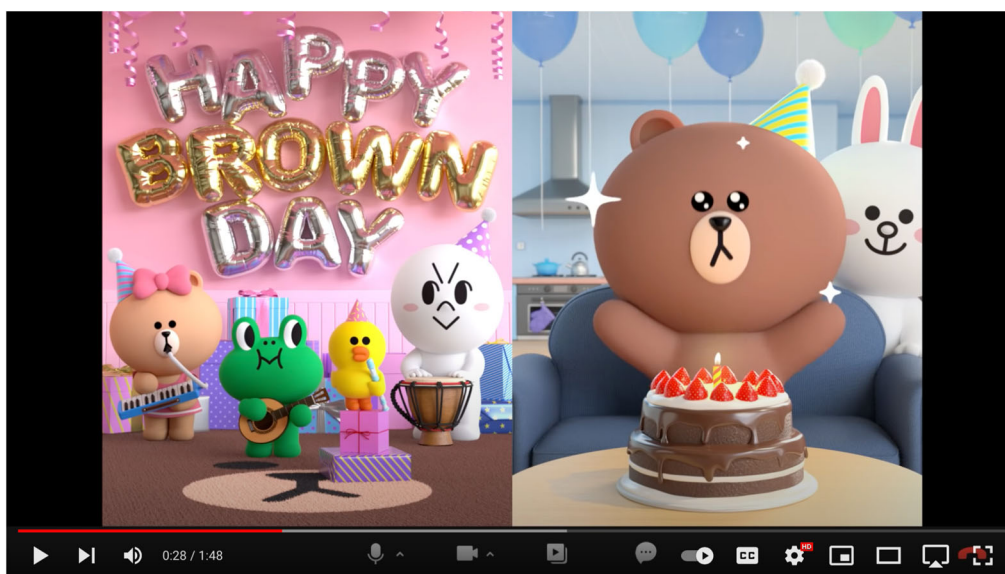


Fig. 4 TATA's personal story, [29]



Fig. 5 KOYA & SHOOKY's night talk, [30]

In addition to the laying of the story background, the interactive video connected with reality is also the strength of LINE FRIENDS. For example, Figure 6 shows a video of other character friends celebrating BROWN's birthday [31]. Through the FaceTime video presentation, it is like a birthday celebration with real friends over the Internet for the audience, which is a means of strengthening the PSI. Moreover, they also produce interactive videos based on the character's personality and story background. For example, Figure 7 is the character COOKY the bunny from BT21 [32]. It is a boxer, and he loves sports. In this case, based on his characteristics created, it led the subscribers together to do a five-minute workout. This interaction with the combination of the character's personality feels natural and logical to the audience, erasing the artificiality of the design and allowing consumers to break their suspicion of virtual media and instead interact with it through action and psychology. This strategy is fun and effective for cementing emotional connections.



#HappyBirthday #August8 #song
Welcome to BROWN DAY virtual party!🎉 | BROWN & FRIENDS

Fig. 6 BROWN's birthday celebration [31]



#BT21
[BT21] COOKY'S LEG DAY ROUTINE: 5 MIN WORKOUT

Fig. 7 COOKY's leg day routine [32]

3.3.2 Weakness

The low frequency of updating interactive videos of IP characters is a weakness from LINE FRIENDS' internal perspective. It is because, for LINE FRIENDS, retail remains the critical segment. The rush to constantly launch new products has led the brand to update videos on the video channel for product promotion frequently. This situation has led LINE FRIENDS to weaken the importance of interactive videos of IP characters. For example, for the LINE FRIENDS channel, the last time videos related to BROWN & FRIENDS characters' stories were uploaded one year ago, while the promotion of product collaborations was updated weekly. If such a situation continues, it must be detrimental to consumers' emotional experience. They expect more interaction and stories from the performers, and the blow to the whole market chain is fatal when such expectations are worn out. When consumers are no longer addicted to IP characters, the extended retail offerings will not appeal to them.

3.3.3 Opportunity

In today's world, the power of celebrities is a reliable resource for LINE FRIENDS in expanding into international markets. The cooperation with the K-pop Boy Band BTS is a good example. As BTS has made a name for themselves in the international music market, BT21 has also gained tremendous attention. Seven of the eight characters in the BT21 family, except for VAN, each correspond to a BTS member. For BTS fans, the appeal of the IP characters does not only come from the design of the characters' images and stories. What is behind it is the love they have for their idols. This is a phenomenon of double parasocial interaction. The benefits of this emotional overlay can also be seen through the data. As of August 2022, Line Friends' YouTube account has 380K subscribers, while BT21's YouTube account has 4.94M subscribers [33, 34]. A difference of nearly 13 times the number shows the strength of this kind of collaboration. Such collaborations also establish a sense of belonging for the client and become a personal statement. Thus, if LINE FRIENDS can seize the celebrity opportunity, then with the development of K-pop, the brand can also expand its market and be known by more people. Fan power is also an effective potential promotion as consumers

3.3.4 Threaten

Users' changing tastes and preferences are a significant threat that LINE FRIENDS will face. Customers' emotional connection for IP characters because of the PSI is the most crucial link for LINE FRIENDS in marketing their IP industry. With the development of emerging IP character brands such as POP MART and Kakao Friends, and the steady presence of established IPs such as Disney and Hello Kitty, it is a test that LINE FRIENDS will need to face to capture customers' continued attention to the characters. If LINE FRIENDS could attract and solidify customers by adding more or designing diverse IP characters' interactive methods, the brand would still exist steadily in popularity. However, suppose the IP character marketing strategy cannot be updated and improved, and the status quo is maintained. In that case, LINE FRIENDS will become a thing of the past as the competitive industry evolves.

4. Results & Discussion

Based on a SWOT analysis of the brand LINE FRIENDS in terms of interactive video strategy for IP characters, the result shows that its development advantages are clear. Including internal storytelling for the integrity of the character universe, interactive video design that combines reality and character characteristics, and the help of the celebrity effect for its market expansion potential. Its weaknesses include the brand's internal lack of attention to interactive videos, and the challenge to the appeal of LINE FRIENDS characters with the developing competition of the IP character industry.

Therefore, according to the result, LINE FRIENDS need to put more effort into developing their outstanding strengths. For example, in terms of internal design, add richer content of the character

universe, or increase the choice of video genre, so that the IP characters are more closely connected to the audience. As well, the brand should seize the opportunity of celebrity effect. Maybe not only limited to cooperation with K-pop Band, reaching out to singers from more nations, or expanding the cooperation of celebrities in a broader range of fields, such as a partnership with athletes, e-sports players, et cetera. At the same time, its disadvantages must also be compensated as soon as possible. For internal emphasis, it is important to realize that it can only reap more incredible retail benefits by constantly strengthening the emotional connection between IP characters and customers. Thus, promoting IP characters on various platforms is central to all development of its brand. As such changes occur, customer loyalty to the brand will increase so that LINE FRIENDS can be more strongly protected in the face of fierce competition. Of course, creating more character series is also a way to meet the preferences of a wider range of customers. However, if the brand blindly expands the number of characters without quality assurance of interaction, it may have the opposite result.

From the SWOT analysis details, LINE FRIENDS IP character marketing successfully validates both PSI and emotional marketing theories. For example, Hartmann and Goldhoorn proposed the possibility of enhancing the audience's emotional feedback to the performers through the cues given by the performers, such as eyes and gestures [15]. When discussing their internal strength, they mention the video's combination of reality and virtual characters. In figure 7, when COOKY leads the audience in fitness, it keeps interacting with the audience with words, such as telling them where the body's force point is in each movement, the purpose of each activity, and the encouragement to persevere [32]. Moreover, Rasmussen's example of the YouTube celebrity also corresponds here [18]. Not only in terms of the impact of the performer relationship on viewers' emotions which is mentioned in the analysis of internal strengths, but also in the opportunities the celebrity effect brings to the brand. As CHUNG and CHO mentioned, viewers generate PSI due to their trust in the celebrities and media interaction [17]. Based on the above analysis, just like the ASPCA's combination of music and photos on its fundraising website, LINE FRIENDS' IP characters generate PSI with their customers through interactive videos and thus create emotional value for them [21].

5. Conclusion

This article discusses the two YouTube channels' interactive video design of the brand LINE FRIENDS against the backdrop of social media becoming a significant lifestyle for people, especially youngsters, and more brands creating IP characters for profit. By compiling the principles, influencing factors, and practical applications of both parasocial interaction and emotional marketing, the article combines a SWOT analysis to analyze how LINE FRIENDS has marketed its IP characters and gained consumer love, both internally and externally. In this way, the article explores whether brands can provide more emotional value to young consumers through the virtual interaction of IP characters. The final conclusion is that brands can establish PSI with consumers through virtual interactions on virtual platforms through IP characters and provide more emotional value by applying it. Therefore, brands that value IP characters as the primary source of profit should refer to PSI and emotional marketing theories in detail and pay attention to the multiple ways of building emotional connection tracks with customers. This method will make customers loyal to the brand and resonate more deeply with the characters.

The research of this article fills the gap in previous work. Using PSI and emotional marketing as the entry point, the article analyzes the principles behind the current trend of the IP character industry for customer emotional manipulation. Furthermore, it evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of LINE FRIENDS, a successful case in development. The reader can understand the hidden emotional value and needs of the times behind IP characters. It also demonstrates the importance of virtual platforms and avatars to contemporary human life. However, the research in this article is still limited because few studies exist in the field of interaction between the IP character industry and customer psychology. At the same time, it also illustrates the developing characteristics of this field. The accelerating pace of life will only increase the need for virtual characters' parasocial and emotional

experiences as when looking at the world's future. Therefore, in this promising field, it is essential to strengthen the sensory diversity of interactive media design and refine the insight into human emotional needs to satisfy more consumers.

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