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Article — Published Version

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Journal of Marketing Management and Consumer Behavior

Suggested Citation: Shuja, Komal; Ali, Mazhar; Anjum, Munazzah Mehak; Rahim, Abdul (2018) : Effectiveness of Animated Spokes-Character in Advertising Targeted to Kids, Journal of Marketing Management and Consumer Behavior, ISSN 2371-3615, Journal of Marketing Management and Consumer Behavior, North York, Canada, Vol. 2, Iss. 2, pp. 31-47, <https://journal-of-marketing-management-and-consumer-behavior.com/index.php/JMMCB/article/view/74>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/194566>

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Effectiveness of Animated Spokes-Character in Advertising Targeted to Kids

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Submitted	29 Dec 2017
Accepted	30 Jan 2018
Available online	12 Feb 2018

JEL Classification

M37

Keywords

Children Buying Behavior
Animated Character
Advertising Effectiveness
Brand Preference
Brand Association
Brand Recall
Brand Recognition

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to find the effectiveness of using animated characters in advertising targeted to kids. The research design is quantitative and its research type is causal. The respondents of the study are 'Pre-primary school going kids' from nine different schools belonging to different areas of Karachi, Pakistan. Data is analyzed through Classification Regression Tree (CART). The findings of this research study reveal that liking of the animated spokes character has a significant effect on product and brand character recognition, Product-Brand Character Association and brand preference. The majority of earlier related studies have been descriptive in nature. This study has used relatively advanced measurement technique like CART thereby making a methodical contribution. It is especially useful considering the paucity of research studies on advertising targeted at kids in Pakistan.

Journal of Marketing Management and Consumer Behavior

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1. Introduction

Kids are innocent and easily gullible, but a very important consumer segment (Soni Swati & Upadhyaya Makarand, 2007). The trend of making commercials targeted at kids is increasing. The concept of content marketing in this digital era is fading, and children find animations more attractive and entertaining to them (Callot & Lee-Na-Lee, 1994). These brand characters have been found to attract children's attention, improve product recognition and create positive brand attitudes (Connor, 2014). The idea of animated spokes-character advertisements is highly admired in today's advertising industries. It is believed to be one of the most effective and valuable marketing strategies nowadays (Sabrina & David, 2004).

Children seem to be in love with the animations and they usually imitate such cartoon characters from which they are inspired (Hassan & Daniyal, 2013). It is noticeable that when children wake up in the morning, they are usually seen wearing their favorite Disney character pajamas, their bed sheet containing cartoon pictures, toothbrushes with full of lively cartoon character designs and in many cases their breakfast cereals packed in cute cartoon boxes and then heading towards their respective schools wearing their favorite cartoon character school bags (Solanki Sandip & Sheth Bhagyashree, 2016). The emotional bond of children with their favorite brand characters shows that commercialization of animated spokes-character has entered the school boundaries (Tanvir & Arif, 2012).

The role of animation has evolved in the last few decades (Callot & Lee-Na-Lee, 1994); but there are very few researches targeted directly towards animated spokes-characters; though there are many researches that provide evidence for their appeal (Lutz, Scott, MacKenzie, & Belch, 2003). Despite the widespread use of characters to market products to children, little is known about how the presence of a familiar character influences children's evaluations of advertising messages (Danovitch & Mills, 2014). In Pakistan, marketers of food products, confectionery items, anti-germs soaps are already using cartoon characters in commercials designed for children. The use of animated spokes-character advertisements in Pakistan television commercials pops up the need for academic research on this subject, especially considering the paucity of local research studies. In addition to it, earlier studies were mainly descriptive just limiting the analysis to correlation. This study has made a pioneering attempt

to draw causality between independent and dependent variables and state magnitude of the impact of using animated characters to persuade kids.

1.1 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the effectiveness of using animated spokes characters in advertising targeted toward kids. This study aims to study the effect of animated brand character likeness on:

- (1) Product and animated brand character recognition
- (2) Association between product and animated spokes characters
- (3) Brand Preference

2. Literature Review

2.1 Animated Spokes Character

Numerous companies are using innovative techniques to influence children in the form of creating unique spokes-characters for their brands (Chiu, Lin, & Liu, 2009). The purpose of the animated spokes-character is to speak up for the products or services that they are representing through providing visual demonstrations to consumers (Stout, 1990). A spokes-character is defined as “a virtual or living stuff that is created by companies for the accomplishment of their marketing objectives” (Phillips, 1996; Philips & Gyoeirick, 1999). The word “spokes-character” is an alternative term for the word “advertising character” (Callot & Lee-Na-Lee, 1994).

2.2 Characteristics of Animated Spokes Characters

The first characteristic of animated characters is their physical appearance. Advertisers prefer such spokes-characters in their advertisements which are pleasant, lovely, attractive in appearance and physically more appealing to the children (Hassan & Daniyal, 2013; Singer, 1983). Children are usually attracted towards the colors, appearances, gestures/postures, logo and designs of these sparkling characters in the advertisements (Shah, Khan, & Habib, 2015).

The second characteristic is the element of humor. Adding humor refers to putting in ‘silly behaviors’, ‘attractive voices’, and ‘unusual faces’. This significantly contributes to the

spokes-character 'likability factor' (Callcott & Phillips, 1996). These humor techniques facilitate the consumers to keep in their mind the character for a long time (Chiu, Lin, & Liu, 2009). In addition to it, adding humor serves as a fun-seeking element. The third characteristic is attention seeking element. This can be done by adding various features within the advertisements such as 'action & movement'; 'rapid pacing in the images', 'effective sound & attention-grabbing music effects' (Calvert, 2008).

The fourth characteristic is the use of voice. The research shows that children are more attracted to 'audio' and 'sound systems' in the advertisements as compared to the images, because 'interesting sound effects' grab instant attention of children to television screen (Calvert, 2008) but it doesn't have major effects on encoding storage on the long term basis in the minds of children (Schwartz, 2003). The effects of 'voice' in the advertisements shown on television have a considerable effect on the learning; and it increases the motivational level in children's attitude and behavior (Baylor, Ryu, & Shen, 2003). Children feel more motivated when human voices in animated spokes-characters are used as compared to that of computer machines generated voices (Baylor, Ryu, & Shen, 2003).

The fifth characteristic is the connection between the distinctive product features and animated spokes-character that the consumers are to be familiar with (Garretson Ja, 2004). These lovely animations form a direct link between the product features, its packaging and advertising in the minds of consumers (Phillips, 1996). These incredible brand characters are made and designed for brands by marketing companies to be served as professional experts in terms of explaining and demonstrating the products to children through advertisement (Garretson Ja, 2004). These lively cartoon characters win more confidence and respect (Callot & Lee-Na-Lee, 1994) from kids compared to other non-animated spokes-characters.

2.3 Influence of Animated Spokes-Characters on Children

It is very obvious that children are the soul of their families; therefore, it is very difficult and challenging for parents to reject their children's preferences. The impact of cartoon characters extends to product packaging as well. The packaging content having printed cartoon character picture catches child's attention, thereby affecting their purchase decision (Ulger, 2009). The

animated spokes-characters not only influence children's attitude, but also other consumers besides kids (Chiu, Lin, & Liu, 2009).

2.4 Animated Brand Character Liking

A child's attitude toward the product is moderated by his emotional evaluation of the brand character (Acuff & Reiher, 1997) and thus leads to purchase intention (Callcott & Alvey; 1991; Callcott & Phillips; 1996). The consumers hold more optimistic views on the background and experiences of animated spokes-characters (Callcott & Alvey; 1991; Callcott & Phillips; 1996). The animated spokes-characters build trust in kids and ultimately to the products they represent (Wen-shin & T.H.S., 2011).

Many past studies, including Roberto Ca (2010), Neely Sm (2002), MC (1994); concluded that children's attention, product recognition and children's liking of products can be boosted by the presence of animated cartoon character in advertising. However, children purchase intention or product preference is not always dependent on liking and recognition of animated spokes-characters present in product advertising (Roberto CA, 2010)

2.5 Product Recognition

According to Horgan Sheena (2005), Children can recognize brands in 18 months' age, draw them when they are 2 years old, develop consumer preference when they turn 4 years and purchase products when they grow as old as 5 years. The use of dazzling cartoon characters is useful for increased product recognition as well as product liking among kids (Keillor, 2007). It is also reported that the children's liking of the animated spokes-characters is significantly correlated with recognition of product (Fischer, Schwartz, Jr, Goldstein, & Rojas, 1991). During the child-development stages, brand-characters play an important role in communicating the brand insights and instilling positive brand attitudes in the children (Lawrance, 2003). Many children identify the products in stores and can request for purchase (McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006). Therefore, it is assumed that:

H₁: Likeness of animated character significantly affects the animated brand character recognition.

H₂: Likeness of animated character significantly affects product recognition

2.6 Product-Brand Character Association

Young children have limited reading skills, but animated spokes-characters serve as a marketing strategy in storing visual brand in their minds. Prior research shows a strong link between brand character and product recognition in the minds of children (Mizerki, 1995). As the age of the child increases, recognition of brand character increases simultaneously. This increased level of recognition in the child towards any particular brand is therefore associated with the age factor positively (Mizerki, 1995).

One challenge faced by companies in the use of animated characters is ensuring the correct and acceptable association between the character and the brand. It is necessary to match the appropriate brand character with the correct product in the advertisements (Huang, Hsieh & Chen, 2011). When the characteristic of 'animated spokes-character' is highly associated with the product features, customers easily remember product features (Garretson and Burton, 2005; Mizerki, 1995). Bahn (1986), involving 4-5 years old children, found that children assumed that the cereals having cartoon characters were sweet and meant for them, whereas; the cereals without cartoon characters, were perceived to be the adult's cereals, healthy and not-so sweet. In a study by Fischer, Schwartz, Jr, Goldstein, & Rojas (1991), 3-6 years old kids were able to recognize varieties of brand symbols/logos and pair the brand logos to respective products. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

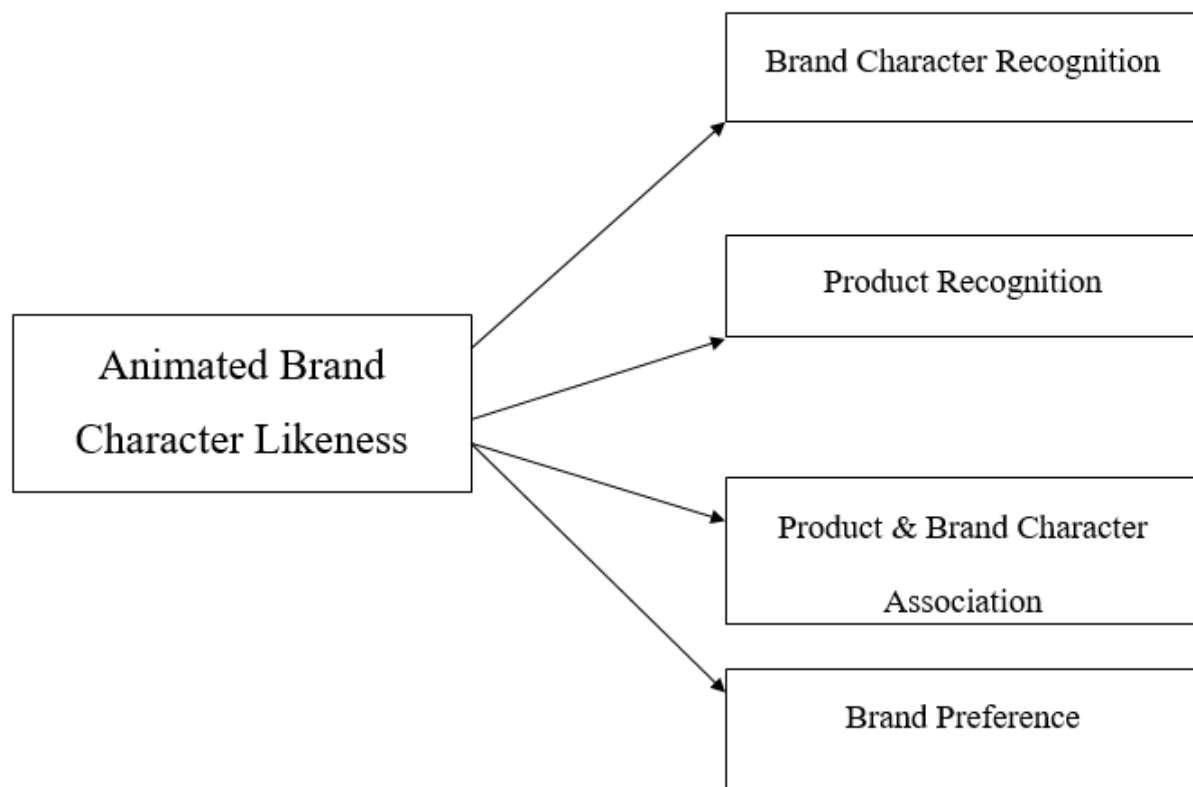
H₃: Likeness of animated character significantly affects the product-animated brand character association

2.7 Brand Preference

Children lack the ability to comprehend the persuasive component of commercials (Wilcox, Kunkel, Cantor, Dowrick, Linn, & Palmer, 2004). Conveying information through cartoon is better than any other mean of information (Garretson JA, 2005). It is obvious that children are fond of the cartoon characters and they can spend maximum time in watching them. Credibility of the cartoon characters among kids is likely to extend to products (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Callcott & Phillips, 1996), which can affect their priorities in buying products (Hassan & Daniyal, 2013; Neley & Schumann, 2004)

The animated spokes-character advertisements promote favorable appraisal on the attitudes and purchase intention of targeted kids (Heiser, Sierra, & Torres, 2008). Findings of Lapierre, Vaala and Linebarger (2010) concluded that children highly liked the taste of the products with animated cartoon characters, compared with the same products without characters. Therefore, we may assume:

H₄: Likeness of animated character significantly affects the brand preference



3. Methodology

The research design was quantitative and its research type was causal. The respondents of the study were 'Pre-primary school going kids' of nine different schools from different areas in Karachi. The following conditions were considered when selecting the sample:

- (a) Children age group between 4 to 6 years old.
- (b) Children who view television regularly.
- (c) Children's acceptance to participate.

3.1 Research Instrument and Data Collection

A graphical questionnaire was constructed with dichotomous questions which included pictures of different brand characters that are shown on the television screen regularly. The questionnaire is adapted from the study of Sabrina & David (2004). All these brands under study used animated characters to promote their products. The questionnaire consisted of graphic pictures of eight known Pakistani brand characters and their respective products. Dichotomous scale for each variable was used in our questionnaire. Variables were measured by a 2-point scale where 1 stands for 'YES' and 0 stands for 'NO'. As our target population was children aging between 4 to 6 years old, so it was difficult to measure their responses through the likert scale. Primary data for the study was collected from 330 pre-primary students from nine different schools belonging to different areas of Karachi. Pilot testing was done with 30 students.

3.2 Procedure

The survey was conducted by calling out students one-by-one. The questionnaire was shown to them on the laptop screen to retain image quality. Students were questioned separately to avoid the possible impact of kids on each other. (1) For Product recognition, students were shown the pictures of products without product names and asked names of products to check their product recognition. (2) For Animated Brand Character recognition, students were shown animated characters without pictures of products and asked names of animated brand characters to check their recognition. (3) For product and animated brand character association, students were shown the pictures of brand characters on left side and products on the right side of the laptop screen and asked to cross match both of them. These kids were used to similar exercises in their classes. (4) For brand character likeness, students were shown animated characters on the laptop screen and asked whether they like them or not. (5) For brand preference, students were shown pictures of products with animated characters on the left side of the laptop screen and same products without animated characters on the right side and asked which of the two they would choose to buy.

4. Data Analysis

There were 8 existing Pakistani brands analyzed for each variable. While computing responses, the results of each variable were summed up on the scale of 0-8. If the sum was greater than 5, the response was considered as positive and coded as “1”, if the sum was less than 5, the response was considered as negative and coded as “0”. For instance; if a student successfully recognized 5 brands out of 8, it would be recorded as successful recognition. Likewise, if a kid was able to correctly cross match brand characters with products 5 or more times, it would be recorded as a correct association. In case of brand preference, if a kid preferred 5 or more products with brand character pictures over exactly same products, but without brand characters, it was considered as brand preference and was coded as 1, otherwise response was coded as 0 (brand with cartoon picture not preferred)

Hypotheses were checked in two stages. In the first stage, cross tab analysis was conducted to analyze the association between independent and dependent variables. All null hypothesis of no association between the variables were rejected because all the P values were less than 0.05.

Table 1

Chi-Square Test (Brand Character Liking & Brand Character Recognition)

	Value	df	P Value
Pearson Chi-Square	55.079a	1	.000
Likelihood Ratio	48.309	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	54.913	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	330		

Table 2

Chi-Square Test (Character Liking & Product Recognition)

	Value	df	P Value
Pearson Chi-Square	17.551a	1	.000
Likelihood Ratio	15.271	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.497	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	330		

Table 3

Chi-Square Test (Brand Character Liking & Product-Brand Character Association)

	Value	df	P Value
Pearson Chi-Square	36.663a	1	.000
Likelihood Ratio	31.731	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	36.552	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	330		

Table 4

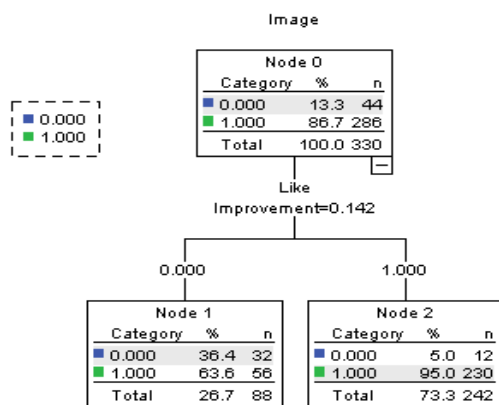
Chi-Square Test (Brand Character Liking & Brand Preference)

	Value	df	P Value
Pearson Chi-Square	31.262a	1	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.046	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	31.167	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	330		

The above statistics show a significant relationship between Animated Brand Character Likeness with brand preference, product and brand character association, product recognition and brand character recognition. But this relationship doesn't necessarily mean a causal relationship. It may be just limited to correlation. Therefore, in the second stage, Classification Regression Trees (CART) were analyzed to find the magnitude of animated character liking influence on brand recognition, product association and brand preference.

4.1 Animated Brand Character Recognition

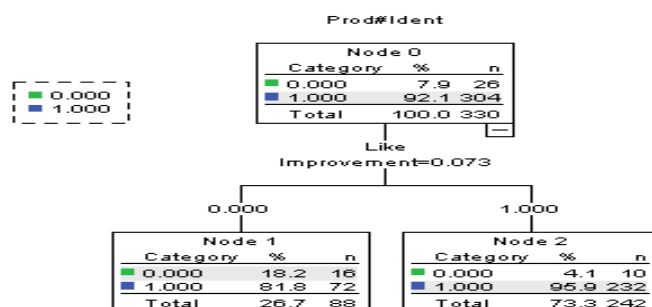
Our first hypothesis is that Likeness of animated character significantly affects the animated brand character recognition. Classification Regression Tree (CART) was used to verify this hypothesis. The output of CART is as under:



CART Model of Character Recognition explains that 286 i.e. 86.7% of sample size recognized the product and 44 kids i.e. 13.3% of the sample size did not recognize the product. The intervention of independent variable-likeness- brings improvement in the results by 14.2%, which split the results into two categories: Dislike and Like. 32 kids who disliked the cartoon character could not recognize the brand character, 56 kids who disliked the brand character still recognized the animated cartoon character. Out of 242 kids who liked the character, only 12 kids did not recognize the product with animated characters, while remaining 230 kids recognized the animated cartoon character. Based on the above test result, we fail to reject the hypothesis H_1 for the given sample; hence we can conclude that likeness of animated brand character has a significant effect on character recognition.

4.2 Product Recognition

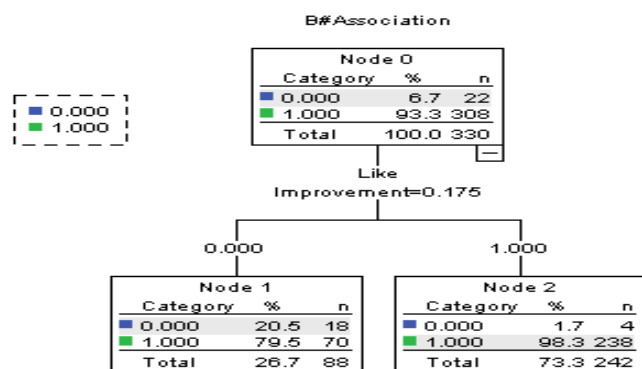
Our second hypothesis is that Likeness of animated character significantly affects product recognition. Classification Regression Tree (CART) was used to verify this hypothesis. The output of CART is as under:



CART Model of Product Recognition explains that 304 i.e. 92.1% of sample size identified the product and 26 kids i.e. 7.9% of the sample size did not identify the product. The intervention of independent variable- Animated Character Likeness -improved the results by 7.3%, which split the results into two categories: Dislike and Like. Among kids, 16 kids who disliked the cartoon character did not identify the product; 72 kids who disliked the brand character, still identified the product. Out of 242 kids who liked the character, only 10 kids could not identify the product while remaining 232 kids successfully recognized the product. Based on the test result, we fail to reject the hypothesis H₂ for the given sample; hence we can conclude that likeness of animated brand character has a significant effect on product recognition.

4.3 Product-Animated Brand Character Association

Our third hypothesis is that Likeness of animated character significantly affects the product-animated brand character association. Classification Regression Tree (CART) was used to verify this hypothesis. The output of CART is as under:

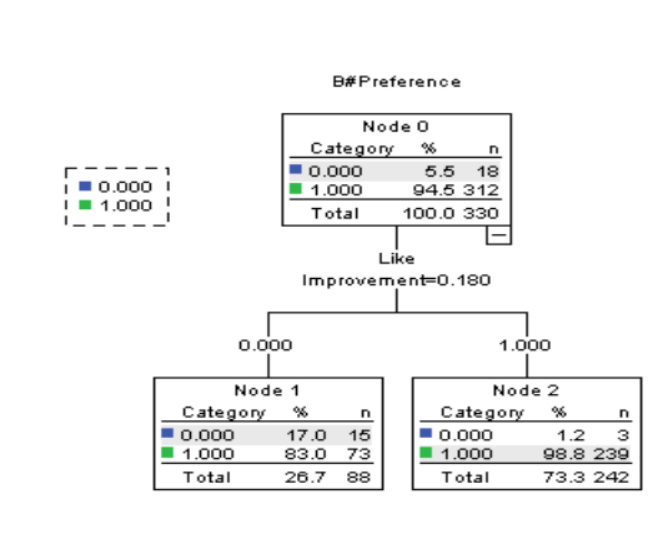


CART Model of Product-Character Association explains that 309 kids i.e. 93.3% of sample size associated product with the animated band character, while 22 kids could not associate the product with the brand character. The intervention of independent Variable-Animated Character Likeness-improved the result by 17.5%, which split the results into two categories: Dislike and Like. 18 kids who disliked the cartoon character did not associate the character with the product, 70 kids who disliked the character still associated the character with the product. Out of 242 kids who liked the brand characters, only 4 kids could not associate the

product with the brand character while remaining 238 were able to associate the brand character with the product. Based on above tests, we fail to reject the hypothesis H_3 for the given sample, hence we can conclude that likeness of animated brand character has a significant effect on the product-brand character association.

4.4 Brand Preference

Our fourth hypothesis is that Likeness of animated character significantly affects the brand preference. Classification Regression Tree (CART) was used to verify this hypothesis. The output of CART is as under:



CART Model of brand Preference explains that 312 i.e. 94.5% of sample size preferred the product with animated cartoon character and only 18 kids i.e. 5.5% of the sample size did not prefer the product with the animated cartoon character. The intervention of independent variable - Animated Character Likeness -brought the improvement in the results by 18%, which split it into two categories: Dislike and Like. Only 15 kids, who disliked the cartoon character, did not prefer the product; 73 kids who disliked the character still preferred the product with the animated cartoon character. Out of 242 kids who liked the character, only 3 kids did not prefer the product with the animated character, while remaining 239 kids preferred the product with the animated cartoon character. Based on above tests, we fail to reject the hypothesis H_4 for the given sample, hence we can conclude that likeness of animated brand character has a significant effect on product preference.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The trend of using the sparkling cartoon characters in the advertisements is highly admired by viewers; these lively creatures are being adopted by an increasing number of companies to grab children's attention instantly (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). Children have a big say in their families and parents find it much difficult to ignore their children's preferences.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of animated cartoon characters in the advertisement. The findings of our research reveal that liking of the animated spokes-character has a significant effect on product and brand character recognition. Our findings are supported by Sabrina & David, (2004); Ajay Jose, (2014), Mizerki, (1995) and Fischer, Schwartz, Jr, Goldstein, & Rojas, (1991). The kids who liked the animated brand characters recognized the product better as compared to those kids who didn't like the brand character. Several studies conducted in past like Mizerki (1995), Callot & Lee-Na-Lee (1994) showed that children find animations close to their hearts and these lovely cartoon characters leave a strong mark in the minds of children, which increases with the age.

This study manifests that the likeness of brand character has a significant effect on brand preference of the kids; these results are consistent with the findings of researches conducted by Huang, Hsieh and Chen (2011) and Luo et. al (2006), which state that higher level of brand character liking significantly affects children's purchase decisions. However, our results are conflicting with Roberto (2010) who argued that children's product preference is not always dependent on the likeness of animated spokes-character.

There were some surprising aspects in the results of our research study. A small portion of kids disliked brand characters, but still recognized and preferred brands without cartoon characters. There may be some other factors responsible for brand recognition and brand preference other than liking of brand characters; which may be investigated in future studies.

5.1 Managerial Implication

The effectiveness of advertising is determined through the achievement of marketing objectives (Ali, 2016). Marketers of products having kids as their primary target market ought to employ animated characters in commercials to achieve marketing objectives such as brand liking, brand recognition and brand preference. It is recommended that companies should use such animated cartoon characters that are attractive and appealing to children's segment. It helps in brand recognition and recall. Marketers should opt for animated commercials or small cartoon films to build an emotional bond between children and animated cartoon characters to develop the brand preference among kids.

5.2 Areas for Further Study

This study focused only on limited variables that are likeness of animated character, brand recognition, product association and brand preferences. However, there are many variables that can be part of future researches such as purchase intention, product choice, attitude towards brand characters and kids buying behavior.

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