

# The Influence of Celebrity Effect on Brand Image in the Internet Celebrity Economy: A Case Study of Prada Endorsed by Cai Xukun

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of the internet celebrity economy, celebrity endorsements have become an important means of brand marketing, and endorsers directly affect the shaping of brand image. This article takes Prada endorsed by Cai Xukun as an example to explore the influence of celebrity effect on brand image. Through literature analysis and case studies, this article systematically analyzes the impact mechanism of celebrity endorsement on brand awareness, consumer cognition, and brand value. The research results indicate that as a young idol, Cai Xukun's endorsement significantly enhances Prada's brand awareness and favorability among young consumers, while also strengthening the brand's fashion and trend attributes. However, celebrity endorsements also carry certain risks, such as negative events that may have a short-term impact on the brand image. Therefore, when choosing a spokesperson, brands need to comprehensively consider their image fit and potential risks.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the existing research on the relationship between internet celebrity economy and celebrity effect, there are mainly the following shortcomings: firstly, there is a lack of systematic theoretical framework for the dynamic mechanism between celebrity effect and brand image, which mostly stays at the description of phenomena and fails to deeply explore the moderating effects of mediating variables such as fan emotional identification and value fit; Secondly, research often focuses on short-term traffic conversion, lacking empirical analysis on brand risk response strategies and long-term image restoration paths caused by negative celebrity events; Once again, existing achievements are mostly based on a single cultural background, lacking comparative research on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements from a cross-cultural perspective. For example, the issue of localization adaptation between international luxury brands (such as Prada) and local Chinese celebrities has not been fully explored. In addition, most researchers lack long-term tracking of online celebrity economic life cycle and brand value precipitation, resulting in insufficient interpretation of the dialectical relationship between "flow foam" and "brand equity". These theoretical gaps result in a

lack of targeted guidance for the practical application of celebrity effects in brand strategy, which urgently needs to be improved through in-depth case analysis and interdisciplinary research. This article will comprehensively understand the current market situation through literature research and case analysis. And taking Prada spokesperson Cai Xukun as an example, the author will deeply analyze the mechanism of celebrity effect and explore its interactive relationship with brand image. This not only helps to understand market dynamics and consumer psychology, but the celebrity effect, as an effective marketing tool, can provide reference for brand marketing by understanding its mechanism of action and degree of influence.

In recent years, with the progress of Internet technology, network information has flooded all aspects of people's lives, which is characterized by large amount of data and high dimensions (Seger Guttman, 2019; Siyal et al., 2021; Wu, 2021; Moraliyska, 2023). Rapid innovation in the network field has brought more development. Due to the ubiquity of social media in people's lives, self media platforms have become an important channel for e-commerce capital (Hedid, Abdessamad, 2020), and the emerging economy of "internet celebrity economy" has emerged in people's vision with its rapid development. The rapid rise of social media and

live video websites such as Weibo, WeChat, Tiktok and Kwai has made the number of online celebrities and fan groups increasingly large. Their commercial influence is expanding day by day, and with their open nature, they are expected to realize their own commercial value. The videos, pictures, texts, etc. posted by internet celebrities, and then promoted through marketing accounts, have become one of the main ways to obtain traffic in contemporary times (Qiao & Shao, 2024). And the internet celebrity economy is centered around internet celebrity individuals or organizations, gathering traffic resources through carefully crafted accounts and realizing traffic monetization. Whether it is collaborating with brand owners to promote products or using the influence of the account itself for marketing, both have brought considerable market profits to internet celebrity accounts.

The celebrity effect refers to the general term for the effect of attracting attention, strengthening the situation, expanding the scope of influence, and the psychological phenomenon of the public imitating celebrities through their popularity or reputation, influence, etc. The celebrity effect is equivalent to an advertising communication method, which not only presents the charm of celebrities to the public, but also conveys the brand to consumers (Lou, 2016). From a psychological perspective, the high popularity of celebrities can attract high attention and visual impact, often forming a demonstrative effect that attracts people's imitation. For example, celebrities' choices of food, clothing brands, tourist destinations, can attract people's attention and imitation of related content. At the same time, advertising is a form of persuasive communication, using celebrities to persuade and play the role of opinion leaders (Xie, 2024). The "halo effect" is also increasingly being used in marketing: consumers' love and pursuit of celebrities extends to everything about celebrities, including blindly following their dressing style, language style, behavior, etc., and then accepting consumer products or social concepts recommended by them.

Driven by the internet celebrity economy, luxury brands such as Prada are accelerating their youthful transformation through celebrity effects, but they also face dual challenges of image and risk. Taking Cai Xukun as an example, although his endorsement brought short-term traffic explosion to Prada, the subsequent negative events led to an increase in the sensitivity of the brand's stock price and a sudden increase in public opinion pressure. Prada has frequently encountered spokesperson collapses in recent years, exposing the vulnerability of relying on

traffic stars - the contradiction between short-term popularity and long-term brand value.

Facing young consumers, luxury goods need to balance traffic and brand tone. Prada's transformation attempts include: turning to athletes (such as Ma Long and Yang Shuyu) and highly national artists (Jia Ling), strengthening brand stability with the concept of "not following the trend"; Simultaneously consolidating the high-end image through art exhibitions and re-tail experience upgrades. However, traffic marketing is still a double-edged sword: although it can quickly reach Generation Z, excessive dependence can weaken brand scarcity, and sustainable influence needs to be built through diversified strategies such as content co creation and value output.

## 2 PRADA'S BRAND DILEMMA AND CAIXUKUN'S TOP CLASS CHARACTERISTICS

In recent years, the rise of online celebrity economy has reshaped the pattern of brand marketing, and celebrity endorsement has become an important lever for the luxury industry to leverage the young consumer market. As an international luxury brand, prada has frequently cooperated with Chinese top artists since 2019, trying to revive the Chinese market through the mode of "traffic+brand". However, this strategy not only brings high exposure, but also falls into the "Curse" dilemma due to the frequent negative events of the spokesperson. Prada has successively signed with top artists such as Zheng Shuang, Li Yifeng and caixukun in re-cent years, but these spokesmen have "collapsed" due to negative events such as surrogacy, prostitution and private life disputes, which has led to the brand falling into the vortex of public opinion for many times. For example, the Zheng Shuang event terminated the contract in only eight days, while the Li Yifeng event triggered short-term fluctuations in the stock price. Although Prada cut quickly to reduce the negative impact, frequent negative associations still weakened its high-end image, which was jokingly called "the beacon of collapsed houses" by netizens.

Caixukun, as a new generation idol, has accumulated a huge fan base by virtue of his debut in the C position of "idol trainee", with more than 38.5 million microblog fans and nearly 18million buffeting fans. Its fans are mainly "generation Z" and have strong consumption power. For example, the album "fans" has sold a total of 2018400 pieces (QQ music) within 3 hours of its launch, and the concert

tickets have been sold out in seconds. This high viscosity fan economy injects young vitality into Prada, making it quickly reach emerging consumer groups. Secondly, Caixukun's fashion expression is highly consistent with Prada's avantgarde and artistic brand tone. For example, in 2019, the advertising blockbuster "human almost" co-operated with artist Cao Fei created Caixukun as a "contemporary youth symbol" through philosophical narration, which strengthened the cultural depth of the brand. In addition, his creative designs in Prada 520 activities (such as the 75m ribbon gift) further highlighted the brand's interpretation of the theme of "love" and "growth".

In order to cater to young consumers, Prada chose Caixukun, an idol with both traffic and fashion appeal, which can really quickly increase the exposure through social media. For example, the advertising film endorsed by Caixukun has been forwarded more than 1 million times on Prada's official microblog, with 30 comments. 60000. However, this "flow dependence" strategy also exposes the brand to uncontrollable risks of star personal behavior.

### 3 PRADA'S CELEBRITY EFFECT MARKETING STRATEGY ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Accurate Selection of Traffic Stars

First, using data-driven decision-making: Prada believes that Caixukun's fan portraits (with a high proportion of women and strong consumption power) and social media influence (with more than 100 billion microblog super words read) can effectively transform young customers. Second, identify the differentiation positioning: Caixukun's "creative Idol" design is consistent with Prada's artistic gene. The advertising film "human almost" starring in it metaphors the brand's exploration of tradition and innovation by playing the role of natural person/man-made person, and strengthens the cultural depth of marketing content. This is not only the balance between art and commerce, but also the in-depth output of culture. The sci-fi narrative and philosophical metaphor in the advertising films (such as the discussion of "human nature and technology") make the marketing activities go beyond the simple product promotion and transform into the transmission of brand values.

At the same time, Prada inevitably needs to bear the risk of audience narrowing. Excessive focus on Caixukun's fan base (mainly young women) may lead

the brand to ignore other potential customers (such as male consumers or high net worth mature customers). Reflect the limitations of the strategy. Once Caixukun's "creative Idol" label collapses (such as being involved in plagiarism disputes or moral scandals), it may damage the brand image, and there are also some hidden dangers in the binding of people.

Prada has long shown itself as a "high cold" image, while the marketing of traffic stars is often accompanied by the culture of the rice circle (such as data ranking, control and evaluation). Some traditional consumers believe that this move "lowers the brand style" and leads to the differentiation of brand loyalty, which leads to the contradiction between elitism and flow culture and the possibility of cultural conflict.

#### 3.2 Omni Channel Integrated Communication

With "human almost" as the core, the short film was distributed through microblogging, dithering and other platforms, with more than 39 million views and 88 million readings of related topics, forming fission communication and marketing of content. At the same time, the sci-fi aesthetics and philosophy topics in the advertising films stimulate users' secondary creation (such as the content derived from the topic of "Prada human almost interpretation" on the microblog), forming a self cycle of brand communication. However, there is a risk of dilution of cultural symbols in this way. In order to cater to the fragmented communication of short video platforms, the advertising film "human almost" was cut into a 15 second version, which led to the simplification of philosophical narrative and weakened the original intention of cultural expression of the brand. At the same time, although the challenges, stickers and other special effects on the dithering platform have increased participation, some contents (such as fans' imitation of Caixukun's style) deviate from the high-end tone of the brand and tend to be excessively entertaining, which has triggered the controversy of "whether Prada is too sinking".

Secondly, Prada allows customers to experience the scene and hold an art exhibition at Prada Rongzhai in Shanghai. It combines Cai Xukun's endorsement with the brand history and the concept of sustainable development to enhance fans' recognition of the brand value. At the same time, the interactive devices in the exhibition (such as the experience area of recycled nylon materials) will transform the brand value proposition into a perceptible experience,

enhance the emotional connection of users, and play the role of immersive consumption guidance.

In 2019, the company cooperated with jd.com to launch new products in autumn and winter, using Caixukun's "carrying capacity" to promote online sales, and fans' orders exceeded 100, realizing the direct transformation from traffic to sales and e-commerce linkage. During the double 11 in 2019, Prada's sales increased by 120% year-on-year (Prada, 2019), verifying the effectiveness of the strategy.

### 3.3 Risk Hedging Mechanism

Prada has signed short-term endorsement agreements with many stars. Once there is negative public opinion (such as Zheng Shuang's surrogacy incident and Li Yifeng's prostitution scandal), it will immediately terminate the contract to reduce brand losses. In addition, Prada has adopted the layout of spokesmen in multiple fields to disperse risks. In recent years, it has introduced athletes such as Malone and Yang Shuyu to disperse its dependence on the flow of entertainment industry. At the same time, it has tried to cooperate with virtual idols to reduce the risk of "house collapse". This strategy also makes the audience diversified and expanded. Athletes' endorsement attracts sports lovers, and virtual idols attract technology lovers, helping Prada break through the boundaries of the original customer base.

However, the short number of spokespersons also makes the brand image fragmented. Frequent replacement of spokespersons (for example, a total of 8 spokespersons signed from 2019 to 2023) may make the brand memory points scattered, leading to confusion in consumer cognition. Short term contracts also make it difficult for spokesmen to understand brand culture in depth. For example, Caixukun repeatedly described Prada's design concept as "high-end" and "art" in the interview. However, it failed to explain the specific connotation and exposed the lack of depth of cooperation.

## 4 ANALYSIS OF RISKS AND CHALLENGES

The granting of the identity of brand spokesperson first represents the enterprise's recognition of its personal brand image and social value. Then there are controversial negative events in the brand spokesperson selected by the enterprise, which is likely to make consumers who are brand followers feel cognitive imbalance and uneasy, and even doubt

the values and concepts advocated by the brand. People also tend to think that the enterprise itself should be responsible for the negative impact of the brand caused by hiring celebrities with bad deeds to speak for it. Compared with positive events, negative events of celebrity spokesmen can attract more public attention, and consumers' negative associations with negative events of celebrity spokesmen are more likely to be automatically transferred to the brand (Campbell & Warren, 2012). From the positive effect, the higher the correlation between the two, the better the endorsement effect. On the contrary, the higher the correlation, the more obvious the reverse effect of negative effects.

In the era of social media, the high prosperity of all kinds of we media has significantly improved the speed and breadth of information circulation. The negative events of brand spokesmen can detonate the whole network in a short time with the slightest change, and the evaluation of consumers on the brand also changes rapidly, and the brand "boycott culture" has become increasingly fierce (Mao, 2022). Social media gives consumers the ability and power to share views and bravely question authority, especially on Facebook, Facebook, and Twitter. Under the background of the vigorous development of sina Weibo, Douban and other we media platforms, once a negative event occurs to the brand spokesperson, the news will quickly spread on the network in a fission mode. In recent years, the negative events of the brand spokesperson during the endorsement period have been exposed and continuously fermented on the network, resulting in an endless stream of negative phenomena that consumers sit on the brand and induce large-scale boycotts. Specifically, after the spokesperson broke out negative events, many consumers would immediately express their views and put pressure on the brand. They chose to issue "call up posts" on microblogging, Douban community and other social media to boycott the brand endorsed by the person concerned, which clearly expressed their disappointment at the brand's inattention, would boycott the inferior artists and the brand they endorsed, required the enterprise to terminate the cooperation with the inferior artists, made a response such as no longer using the brand products, appealed to the surrounding people not to buy the products endorsed by the inferior artists, and used brand competitive products instead; It will also "besiege" the brand's e-commerce live room and directly convey the boycott opinions by commenting on the screen.

Take Prada, Caixukun's spokesperson, as an example. Prada chose Caixukun as its spokesperson

and really reaped a wave of traffic dividends. On the second day after Prada officially announced Cai Xukun as its brand spokesperson, Prada's hot topics were exposed to more than 700million people, and the videos related to Cai Xukun released by Prada's official micro blog were broadcast more than 30million people. Murcia Prada, the current CEO of Prada group, al-so said publicly that "fans know Prada not through us, but through Kun". On June 26, 2022, the Caixukun scandal (involving minor female scandals and falling in love) broke out, and the whole network was in an uproar. The image of Caixukun is also separated from the positioning of the brand image of "high cold" and "intellectual". With the fermentation of Caixukun incident, Prada's brand reputation has been greatly impacted. On the day after the scandal broke out, Prada's share price suffered a big setback and its market value evaporated by billions of Hong Kong dollars (Xueqiu, 2023). Prada was nicknamed as a "house collapse specialist" by netizens due to frequent house collapse incidents (seven spokespersons in five years were thundering), and even questioned as "vague brand values". Prada also fell into the public opinion storm of "spokesperson curse", and the voice for the brand owner to terminate Caixukun was also growing.

## 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Correct Choice of Spokesperson

It is also important for celebrities to have a certain degree of social trust. Only by giving people a sense of trust can advertising play a positive role, and vice versa. When choosing celebrity endorsements, the past experience and moral level of celebrities should be investigated. Only celebrities with high social trust can be trusted by consumers. Therefore, enterprises should be careful in choosing spokesmen. In addition to popularity and trust, they should also comprehensively consider various factors including image, affinity, popularity and so on. They can even establish an evaluation system of celebrity advertising indicators to screen out the really suitable candidates according to the actual needs.

### 5.2 Enhance the Relevance Between Celebrity Effect and Brand Positioning

On the one hand, the corresponding celebrities should be selected through a combination with the brand's

functional attributes. When applying the celebrity effect in brand communication, the brand's functional positioning must be fully established first, followed by the corresponding selection of celebrity endorsers. For example, slimming celebrity endorsement is required for weight loss products, and sports celebrity endorsement is required for sportswear. On the other hand, the corresponding celebrities should be selected through an integration with the brand's target audience. Different audiences often have celebrities in their fields. When selecting celebrities, it is necessary to select the corresponding celebrities in combination with the audience of the brand. For example, for pharmaceutical products, elderly celebrities can be selected to endorse, which can enhance the relevance between celebrity effect and brand positioning.

### 5.3 Enable Virtual Spokesperson

While the real spokesperson has a negative image, some characteristics of the virtual spokesperson are amplified. For the brand, the price advantage of the virtual spokesperson is obvious. The brand does not need to bear the high star endorsement fees, and it can effectively avoid the collapse of the spokesperson (Cao, 2024). Virtual spokesperson is a virtual role created for the purpose of selling products or services. In 2018, noonoonouri, a virtual celebrity from Germany, broke the wall of dimensionality and won the favor of major brands soon after her debut. Chanel, Dior and other brands asked her to watch the brand show or invite her to "shoot" advertisements.

### 5.4 Improve the Risk Early Warning and Long-Term Response System

Conduct real-time monitoring of public opinion, deploy AI driven public opinion analysis tools, and preset negative event response processes (such as 72 hours termination statement, values restatement announcement) to reduce the loss of brand image. At the same time, an artist's moral hazard rating system is established to comprehensively monitor public opinion (such as latent fans, legal compliance review) and analyze the stability of public image, so as to avoid relying solely on traffic data. Strengthen the guidance of fan community, turn fans into brand ambassadors through membership system and exclusive activities (such as "prada520" emotional marketing participated by Caixukun), strengthen rational consumption advocacy, and reduce irrational krypton behavior.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Under the background of the vigorous development of online celebrity economy, celebrity effect has become an important means of brand image building and reaching young consumer groups. Taking Prada, who is endorsed by Caixukun, as an example, this paper systematically analyzes the two-way impact of celebrity effect on brand image, reveals the opportunities and risks of traffic marketing, and provides theoretical and practical enlightenment for brand optimization.

The study found that Caixukun, as a top class idol of the new generation, has significantly improved Prada's brand recognition and popularity among young consumers with his huge fan base and high viscosity fan economy. Its combination with brand artistry and Avantgarde tonality has strengthened Prada's fashion attributes and values output through cultural in-depth marketing activities such as human almost. However, the strategy of relying too much on traffic stars also exposed brand vulnerability. The negative events of Caixukun and other spokesmen have led Prada to fall into a crisis of public opinion for many times. The fluctuation of stock price and the public opinion label of "house collapse specialist" reflect the contradiction between short-term flow dividend and long-term brand value. Research shows that the risk of celebrity endorsement is not only due to the uncontrollability of personal behavior, but also due to the instant and amplification effect of information dissemination in the era of social media, which makes the brand image vulnerable to joint impact.

Based on this, this paper proposes that brands need to build a multi-dimensional risk hedging mechanism: first, select spokesmen through data-driven and values, and establish a moral hazard assessment system; Second, adopt diversified endorsement strategies, introduce representatives from different fields such as athletes and virtual idols, disperse risks and expand audience boundaries; Third, strengthen the core of brand culture, deepen the emotional connection of users through art exhibitions and immersive experience, and avoid the dilution of brand image caused by excessive dependence on traffic marketing. In addition, the study emphasizes the potential of virtual spokesmen, and their controllability and cost advantages provide a new way for brands to avoid the risk of "house collapse".

This study also has some limitations. For example, the cases focus on a single luxury brand, which can be expanded to comparative analysis in

different industries or cross-cultural contexts in the future; In addition, the long-term tracking of the relationship between celebrity effect and brand value still needs more empirical data. In general, this paper provides an important reference for the brand to balance the flow and tonality, short-term popularity and long-term assets in the era of online celebrity economy, and reveals the dialectical logic behind the celebrity effect - only on the basis of precise matching, risk control and deep cultivation of culture can we realize the sustainable growth of brand value.

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