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The Impact of Character Collaboration Product Characteristics on Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention: Focusing on F&B Products*

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of character collaboration product characteristics on brand awareness and purchase intention within the food and beverage (F&B) industry, with a special focus on Generation MZ's growing interest in such products. The methodology involves a comprehensive review of existing literature on character marketing, brand awareness, and consumer purchase intention, supplemented by case studies of successful character collaborations in the F&B sector. The findings reveal that character collaborations significantly impact brand awareness and purchase intentions, particularly among younger consumers like Generation MZ. These collaborations not only rekindle nostalgia but also introduce new and exciting consumer experiences, effectively attracting a wide demographic. The success of character-themed products, from Pokémon bread to Coca-Cola's League of Legends collaboration, underscores the strategy's effectiveness in boosting brand recognition and consumer engagement. The implications of this research are manifold for the F&B industry. Firstly, it highlights the importance of leveraging popular characters to forge emotional connections with consumers. Secondly, it suggests that product development should closely align with consumer preferences and market trends to maximize appeal. Lastly, it positions character collaboration as a strategic marketing tool that not only enhances product sales but also strengthens brand loyalty and facilitates sustained brand growth.

Keywords: Character Collaboration, Brand Awareness, Purchase Intention, F&B Products

Major Classification Code: M31, M39, L66

1. Introduction

Lately, the F&B industry has been leveraging partnerships with well-known characters as a robust strategy for branding, aiming to set their products apart. Such

collaborations can potentially boost brand recognition through the emotional bonds consumers form with specific characters, subsequently leading to heightened intentions to buy. The focus of this investigation is on the rising affinity towards character collaboration products among buyers,

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with a particular emphasis on Generation MZ. The study is set against a backdrop of intensifying competition in the food and beverage market, where firms are experimenting with various marketing tactics to enhance brand visibility and motivate consumer purchases. Collaborations with characters have emerged as a prominent strategy, garnering significant interest and success, especially among the youth. Analyzing the effects of these collaborations on consumer awareness of products, brand attitudes, and intentions to purchase is deemed essential for crafting marketing strategies.

The food sector is currently experiencing a surge in innovative marketing efforts aimed at capturing consumer interest, notably through alliances with famous Intellectual Properties to target Fun+Consumers who seek distinctive experiences and amusement. It's anticipated that the food and retail industry will persist in introducing character collaboration products into 2024, driven by the previous year's growth in sales from collaboration products among a broad demographic from the 2030 generation 'kidults' to children (Cha & Lee, 2021; Marhamat, 2024).

The familiarity and high recognition of these characters among consumers are thought to have played a role in influencing product sales. Additionally, the inclusion of collectible items like character stickers and keyrings with these products has been activating the collecting passions of fans. The purpose of this investigation is to discern the impact of the recent trend in food collaboration marketing within the food industry on consumer brand awareness and purchasing decisions (Lee et al., 2021).

The study outlines several key objectives: Firstly, to explore the effects of character collaboration product features on brand recognition. Secondly, to evaluate how these features influence consumer's purchasing decisions. Thirdly, to delve into the perceptions of character collaboration products, particularly among Generation MZ. Lastly, to offer actionable insights for the strategic application of character collaboration marketing within the F&B industry. Through a comprehensive understanding of character collaboration's significance and role in the F&B sector, this research intends to assist corporations in developing more efficient brand strategies, enabling them to attract consumer interest, boost brand image positively, and ultimately, augment product sales (Wu & Huang, 2023).

2. Literature Review

This study provides a comprehensive review of existing research and theory to understand the impact of character collaboration product attributes on brand awareness and purchase intentions of food and beverage (F&B) products. The review focuses on brand awareness

and purchase intention, character marketing, and the role of character collaboration in the F&B industry.

2.1. The History and Current State of Character Marketing

Character marketing is a strategy that uses recognized characters associated with a particular brand or product to attract consumer attention and create an emotional connection. Characters provide a unique and memorable way to communicate brand messages and can build strong emotional bonds with consumers (Callcott & Phillips, 1996). Character marketing provides familiarity and trust to consumers, which can increase brand awareness and positively impact purchase intentions.

2.2. The Role of Character Collaboration in the Food and Beverage Industry

In the food and beverage industry, character collaborations have become an important strategy for product differentiation and consumer engagement. By collaborating with popular characters, brands can gain a prominent presence in their target markets and drive purchases, especially among younger consumers. By providing consumers with new and exciting experiences, character collaboration products can create a positive image of the brand and strengthen consumer repurchase intent. Character collaborations also play a big role in brand promotion on social media and online communities. Consumers share character collaboration products on social media, which can further increase brand awareness and product popularity through the word-of-mouth effect. Therefore, character collaboration can be utilized as an important marketing tool that directly affects brand awareness and purchase intention (Long et al., 2018).

2.3. Brand Awareness of Character Collaboration in the Food and Beverage Industry

Brand awareness is an indicator of how easily consumers can recognize and remember a particular brand and is one of the key elements of brand equity (Aaker, 1991). Keller (1993) defines brand awareness as the depth and breadth of brand knowledge, which influences the prioritization of brand choices in a consumer's purchase decision process. Brand awareness is formed through the psychological processes of exposure, learning, and memory, and can be reinforced through various marketing communication activities, including advertising, public relations, and word-of-mouth.

2.4. Purchase Intentions of Character

Collaboration in the Food and Beverage Industry

Purchase intention is an indicator of how strongly a consumer intends to purchase a particular product or service and is used to predict the likelihood of actual purchase behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), purchase intention is influenced by three main factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Purchase intention is based on a positive attitude toward the product, subjective norms perceived as social pressure, and perceived confidence and resources to perform the purchase behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1972; Montano & Kasprzyk, 2015).

3. Case Studies

3.1. Domestic Case

SPC Samlip, which launched Pokémon bread in the late '90s and achieved an average monthly sale of 5 million units, broke its own record by selling 14 million units within two months after relaunching the product 16 years later. The popularity of Pokémon bread, initially sparking a rush at convenience stores, has expanded from evoking nostalgia among the MZ generation to capturing the interest of elementary and middle school students. Following this trend, Dunkin' and Baskin-Robbins have also introduced Pokémon-themed products (Kang, 2022).

With the sustained popularity of Pokémon bread, other companies have quickly joined the race to market character-themed bread. In August, Lotte Confectionery started offering four types of character breads from Digimon Adventure, a franchise that rivaled Pokémon's popularity in the 2000s, at 7-Eleven, Lotte Mart, and Lotte Super. According to Lotte Confectionery, 250,000 units of Digimon bread sold out at 7-Eleven alone within a week of its release. Previously introduced by SPC Samlip, Digimon bread followed the successful footsteps of Pokémon bread in 2001, achieving daily sales of 700,000 to 800,000 units and generating over 10 billion won per month in revenue (Byun, 2022).

The food industry is introducing new products to engage consumers passionate about specific domains, targeting MZ generation consumers with distinctive personal interests and tastes. Indeed, the trend of "digging," which involves deeply exploring a favorite area and naturally leading to the consumption of related products, has emerged as a new consumption pattern among MZ consumers. To cater to this trend, the retail industry is unveiling a range of products for enthusiasts in each domain. Notably, products catering to various fandoms, from games to characters and celebrities, are garnering attention. Coca-

Cola launched 'League of Legends' (LoL) Coca-Cola Zero Legends in a global partnership with the game's developer and publisher, Riot Games. This product marks the fourth project of Coca-Cola's global innovation platform, Coca-Cola Creation, in Korea, featuring the thrilling taste of experience points (+XP) gained during the game's journey (Hwang, 2023).

CJ CheilJedang revealed a limited-edition product, 'Hatban Cup Ban x Diablo 4,' in collaboration with Blizzard Entertainment's 'Diablo 4'. Each package of the 'Hatban Cup Ban X Diablo IV' collaboration features a major character from Diablo IV. The product line includes six varieties: Spam Mayo, Strong Sauce Barley, Jikwa Jajang, Kimchi Flying Fish Roe, Wakame Seaweed Soup, and Thai Rice. Additionally, these products come with coupons for a Diablo IV merchandise event, offering customers the chance to win a variety of highly collectible prizes. E-Mart 24 launched four food products using the Tower of Gods IP in anticipation of the mobile game 'Tower of Gods: New World'. To convey the game's title and narrative, the food items were selected to resemble a 'tower' and were cleverly named. The lineup includes 'Gimbap's Tower', a lengthy kimbap; 'Samgimbap's Tower', a stack of triangle-shaped kimbap; and 'Hamburger', featuring a tall stack of two patties and three slices of cheese (Kim, 2023).

3.2. The Japanese Example

Japan is renowned as a hub of iconic characters, earning its nickname as a "character paradise." This distinction extends into the food sector, where numerous successful collaborations featuring beloved characters have taken place. In a notable example from 2020, Daido Drinks partnered with the acclaimed anime "Demon Slayer" to launch a line of canned coffees adorned with 28 distinct characters from the series. Rather than designing new images, actual anime scenes were utilized for the cans, offering fans the unique opportunity to connect specific episodes to their favorite beverages. This approach not only heightened fan engagement but also revitalized Daido Can Coffee's sales, particularly among consumers in their 20s and 30s, reversing a previous downturn. (Han, 2017).

Chiikawa, a character cherished by Japanese schoolgirls, has expanded its presence through diverse collaborations across the food spectrum, including chocolates, breads, jellies, ramen, and instant soups, catering specifically to the preferences of young females. Moreover, Japan's Agricultural Cooperatives (JA) have adeptly embraced character marketing strategies, introducing "JA Character Land," a website that showcases a collection of characters and logos from cooperatives nationwide. This initiative promotes campaigns that associate these characters with regional specialty products,

using social networking services (SNS) to boost local agricultural consumption. ("Collaboration Project with Chiikawa," 2023).

Kumamon, hailing from Kumamoto Prefecture, stands out as one of the most recognized local characters. An official from aT pointed out that the key to Kumamon's success lies in first endearing the character to consumers, thereby elevating the profile of the Kumamoto region in their minds. This strategy has led to a consistent increase in sales for businesses leveraging the Kumamon character, culminating in total sales of Kumamon-themed products amounting to 159 billion yen (approximately 1.417 trillion won) in 2022. Figure 1. shows an example of how a Japanese character collaboration can create a strong connection with your customers (Kumamon, 2022).

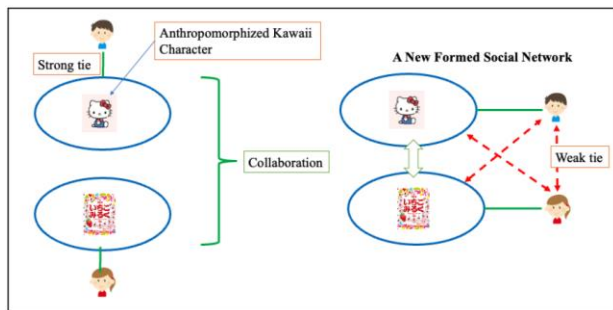


Figure 1: Expanding Connections through Collaboration

4. Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the impact of character collaboration product characteristics on brand perception and consumer purchase intention in the F&B industry. Through the analysis of domestic and international case studies, the various roles and effects of character collaboration in the actual market were explored in depth. The results show that character collaboration not only has a positive impact on consumer awareness and purchase intention, but also plays an important role in building strong brand loyalty, especially among younger consumers such as Generation MZ.

The various cases analyzed in this study demonstrate that character collaborations can significantly improve brand awareness. Products such as Pokémon Bread appealed to consumers of all ages, including Generation MZ, by triggering nostalgia for the past. This shows that the creative combination of character popularity and product plays an important role in attracting consumers' attention and creating a positive perception of the brand.

The results also show that character collaboration products have a positive impact on consumers' purchase

intentions. Character collaboration products provide consumers with a new experience, which promotes curiosity and desire to purchase the product. In particular, collectibles such as character band-aids and keychains that come with collaboration products are an important factor that stimulates the collecting desire of enthusiasts and drives additional purchases.

This research has several important strategic implications for the food and beverage industry. First, brands should actively consider collaborating with popular characters to strengthen emotional connections with consumers. Second, when developing character collaboration products, brands should closely analyze consumer tastes and market trends to design products that fit their target consumer base. Third, character collaboration is not just a way to boost product sales, but also an important strategy to enhance brand image and awareness, and should be actively integrated into marketing communication strategies.

Future research should further explore the impact of character collaborations on long-term brand value. Furthermore, studies that compare the effects of character collaborations in markets with different cultural backgrounds are needed, and analyzing the different responses of consumers can contribute to the development of more customized marketing strategies. In conclusion, this study confirms that character collaboration plays an important role in enhancing brand awareness and purchase intention in the F&B industry. This collaborative strategy creates a strong emotional bond between brands and consumers and lays the foundation for sustained brand growth.

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