

Mascot and Brand Sustainability in Pandemic Era: Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Nowadays, A Mascot is widely used for various purposes, such as brand identity and promotion. Japan can be considered the most prosperous country in creating many iconic mascots that are proven popular and influential as place branding. The utilization of mascots for place branding is regarded as a common practice in Japan to the point that its prefectures and provincial policies have their mascots. Furthermore, several cities in Indonesia, like Surabaya, Balikpapan, and Malang, also created city mascots that act as city icons and representatives. Other than Place Branding, mascots can be used for communication or events such as the Asian Games 2018, in which the mascot acts as its event branding and represents the eastern, central, and western regions of Indonesia. But are mascots still relevant in this pandemic era? The significance of the mascot's impact on brand sustainability in this pandemic era deserves to be questioned due to the drastic changes to all aspects of life that the pandemic brings. With the "new normal," most kinds of stuff are geared to be online instead of offline to avoid any physical interaction that can trigger the spread of the virus. In addition, user-friendly websites and applications are more in demand than before, and some are using mascots as an intermediary between the website and the user. Therefore, up-to-date research is needed to identify the connection between mascots and brand sustainability. The proposed study aims to summarize the literature on the development of the use of mascots for the past three years during the Covid-19 pandemic era (2020 – 2022). Conducted research will utilize the Systematic Literature Review method by assembling two research questions (RQ), 1) Are there any shift in the use and benefits of mascots to brand sustainability during the pandemic era? 2) How is the development of mascot research to date? Journals are collected based on journals indexed by Google Scholar, and the keywords used are mascot, brand, and pandemic. The final result of the study answered the two RQs.

Keywords

Mascots; Branding; Sustainability; Literature Review

1. Introduction

When someone is selling lemonade, what is the difference between that exact lemonade and the other lemonade sold by the person next door? Branding came as the solution to differentiate a product, event, and activity from another. Proper branding could even help the brand's sustainability get through a crisis time (Ash, 2020), which is what is needed now. One would say a pandemic on a global scale, such as today, is a "once in a lifetime" event; therefore, to carry on, humankind must adapt to the current situation. A few years after being hit by the pandemic, various innovation to adapt to the situation has been made by multiple parties worldwide, even organizations and companies. To survive the pandemic, organizations and companies made many breakthroughs: some reduced their operational cost, some decided to temporarily close their business (Antonova et al., 2021), and some strengthened their brand's identity through various branding strategies. One of the well-known branding strategies is using mascots as the representation of the brand. The research that has been done by (Esfahani et al., 2022) shows that a mascot has a significant effect on increasing the brand's awareness, brand recall, and customer's intention to procure the brand's product. Compared with a logo, the mascot has vast benefits due to its physical form resembling a human's physical condition, which familiarizes the mascot rather than the logo (Ko et al., 2022). On some occasions, like the Olympic Games, the mascot becomes one of the critical parts of the whole brand (Palladino et al., 2022), and it plays a huge role in the humanization of a modern corporation (Singh, 2021).

2. Research Planning

The change of conditions before the pandemic and during the pandemic also forced organizations and companies to change their mascot as part of branding strategy to fit with current conditions. This change raises a few questions:

- One, are there any shifts in the use and benefits of mascots to brand sustainability during the pandemic era?
- Two, how is the development of mascot research to date?

Knowing the connection between the brand's sustainability and mascot during the pandemic era will not only give insight for future research to continue but also give a strong example of a successful branding strategy during the pandemic era that was able to strengthen the brand's sustainability in the future since the humankind have been lived for thousand years. There is no doubt that in the far future, another pandemic will occur.

The research will be conducted to find the answer to the raised research questions above. The conducted research will be done using the Systematic Literature Review Method as follows:

- Database For Research: Conducted research will mainly use Google Scholar as its main source. Through GoogleScholar the search might broaden to another digital library from various publishers such as ResearchGate, SpringerLink, Elsevier, and TandF.
- Keyword For Research: The conducted research will use five main keywords: Brand, Mascot, Pandemic, Covid-19, and Virtual and a combination between five of the keywords, for example: "Virtual Mascot", "Brand Pandemic" et cetera.
- Source of Research: The source that can be used for the conducted research is as follows: Book, Journal, Article Proceeding, and Thesis. It is also possible that the conducted research might use a Website as a supplementary source.

This paper consists of five main sections with a total of seven sections besides the two opening sections Introduction and Research's Planning. First, the development of mascots without being affected by the pandemic era will be taught. Besides research from various researchers, mascots from famous events such as the Olympic Games will also be discussed in this section. Next, section two will discuss how the pandemic forced brand owners to adapt to the situation by changing strategies to maintain the brand's sustainability. The third section will consist of the main topics, the change of mascots during the pandemic era, and mainly will discuss conducted research from around the world to maintain the sustainability of a brand. The fourth section will be a discussion section where an analysis of sections one, two, and three will be given. The last section will be the conclusion, where the research question will finally be answered.

3. Mascots Without The Pandemic

Even when putting the pandemic aside the context, the development of a mascot has been done a few times with different objectives and representation. Research conducted by (Kaufmann L. A., 2021) tries to analyze the existing mascot from a football club to decide whether it's fitted with the market using SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. Besides recommendations for future work, the research also pointed out how the usage of mascots for a sports club in the Europe region is less advanced than in the United States. It was quite an agreeable argument when one said the use of mascots in the United States was quite advanced. Mascots have become common usage in the United States, to be precise, in sports clubs all around the United States.



Figure 1 Various Mascots In the United States

United States College Sports Club use various way to create their own mascots that are able to represent their sports club. For example, in Figure 1 above, the blue-dominant mascot on the bottom right of the pictures, resembles a superhero character, the Duke Blue Devil. Whether it's human-like mascots or even real human mascots such as Leprechaun, mascots are used by Notre Dame Fighting Irish football team based in Indiana, United States (Kaufmann, 2020). In the United States, the creation of a mascot can also be done through collaboration from multiple disciplines. Now we know about the Leprechaun, a real man wearing a mascot costume that reassembles creatures with the same name, but what about an automated one? From the collaboration of multiple disciplines, a robotic goat-like mascot created by a student of Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Chang et al., 2020) was made. Institute based in Worcester, United States, strengthens the previous research's point that the usage of mascots in the United States is, without a doubt, advanced. Different from how the United States utilize its mascot to represent a particular organization, company, or sports club, Japan frequently uses mascot for their tourism. Many mascots were made as a representation for each of the prefectures or even cities in Japan, usually known as "*Gotouchi kyara*". Not only are these mascots used as a city branding tool: to promote local products and tourism spots, but these mascots are also used as a tool for communication between local residents (Lisa, 2014). An example of a well-known *Gotouchi kyara* mascot in Japan can be seen in Figure 2, figure 3, and 4 below.

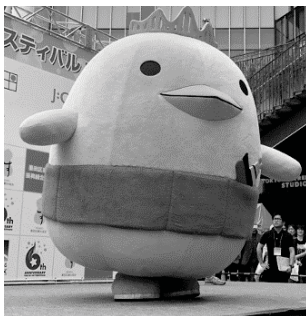


Figure 2 Bariii-san



Figure 3 Melon Bear



Figure 4 Kumamon

From left to right, Bariii-san is the mascot for Imabari City in Ehime Prefecture, the physical form of chicken was used because Imabari was well known for its chicken-based food such as *Yakitori*, which means grilled chicken. Figure 3 The melon bear represents two unique things of Yubari City in Hokkaido Prefecture, and it's their melon and their bear. The last picture, figure 4, is a very well-known mascot, Kumamon, which represents the Kumamoto Prefecture and becomes the best mascot in Japan in 2011 based on people's vote (Village House, 2020). Besides mascots for their prefectures, recently, Japan also used mascots for the biggest sports game in the world: Tokyo Olympics Games 2020, as seen in Figure 5 below.



Figure 5 Tokyo Olympics Games 2020

Even though the Tokyo Olympics Games were held in 2021 and during the Pandemic era, the creation of the mascot itself has already been done before the pandemic hit Japan. In figure 4 (left) was Miraitowa, from the abbreviation of two words, *mirai* or, in English, future and *towa* or eternity together. These words have the meaning "To promote a future full of eternal hope in the hearts of people all over the world." Besides Miraitowa, Someity is the mascot for Tokyo Paralympic Games 2020. Unlike Miraitowa, who mainly uses blue to symbolize "Innovation and Harmony." Someity mainly uses the color of cherry blossom, a flower that only grows in Japan. In line with its color, Someity's name came from *someiyoshino* a widespread variety of cherry blossoms, and sounded like "So Mighty" to symbolize the strength of each Paralympic participant. Even though both mascots have different meanings and representations, the physical appearance of both of the mascots looked friendly and harmless (Chiabaut, 2021). This could happen due to during their creation, the Olympic Committee of Japan asked thousand of children to vote for their favorite mascot character for their Olympic Games. The involvement of children here is to strengthen the concept of *yuru kyara* mascot: imperfect and childlike, sometimes with animal resemblances which result in cute or *kawaii* characters (Barrows, 2014). However, this is still a hypothesis and need further research to prove whether there is a connection between children participant and the mascot looking friendly and harmless.

A book written by (Anderson, et al., 2020) mentioned the phenomenon of the rising and acceptance of hologram culture. One of the most famous examples was Hatsune Miku. Debuted on 31 August 2007 and created by Crypton Future Media, Hatsune Miku became one of the most famous virtual idols in the world (Karki, 2021). Besides the debut of a virtual idol, and other products of hologram culture, the virtual influencer entered its early stage in 2016. Virtual influencers are mascots generated by computers to do what influencer does, promoting a product (Audrezet & Koles, 2023). Some of the renowned virtual influencers were: Rozy from South Korea, Zinn from Japan, and Lil Miquela from the United States of America (Conti et al, 2022).

4. How the Pandemic Affect The Brand

It is no longer a debate that the pandemic forces humankind to change many aspects of their life. The pandemic led humanity to a new trend, *Work From Home*, where everything is done online, since having face-to-face meeting issue the danger of being infected by the Covid-19 virus. The pandemic also forced the brand owner to change their strategies. Some research pointed out the fact that the pandemic's restriction changes customer's behavior (Meheli & Swaminathan, 2021) during the event of contagious diseases; there are many products that use anthropomorphism branding strategy will require extensive re-branding due to the social withdrawal experienced by the customer (Ding & Xu, 2022). Businesses that were able to utilize the internet were recommended to use it. For example, due to the pandemic's restriction on the football stadium, football teams are at the edge of losing their fans. In order to solve this problem, the research held by (Szczechowski, 2021) recommends football teams use social media as media to keep in close touch with their fans and ensure the brand's awareness. In other places, a business who unable to operate without face-to-face meetings turned their strategy to tighten the social distancing protocol for their daily operations (Carr, 2021). Many events with the purpose of entertainment such as the Olympics Games were forced to be put on hold for safety measures. Another example of an event that was delayed due to the pandemic was Hatsune Miku's debut concert at the Coachella in 2020 this delay caused the organizer to lose almost 26.1 billion USD in the US alone (Anderson N. , 2021).

5. Mascots During Pandemic Era

Nonetheless, it depends on humankind to decide how they perceive this pandemic. In Japan, the rise of the pandemic era also rise a chance for them to revive old folklore into a mascot, it is called Amabie: a Japanese female creature from the Edo period which consists of a human face, a birds beak, and her whole body is covered in scale. In Western, she could be called a mermaid (seen in Figure 6). Not just her physical face resembles *doctor plague*, a famous mask during the Black Plague era, and her body resembles Armadillo, a mammal which heavily connected to Covid-19 (Merli, 2020). Amabie is also a pandemic spiritual icon which able to tell whenever a plague will occur and inform everyone about it, thus protecting the land of Japan from it (Hrvatın, 2022).



Figure 6 Illustration of Amabie

In different parts of Japan, mascots that used to be the symbol of cities or prefectures, such as Kumamon in Figure 4, were re-branded to send messages to the locals. It was Miyazaki Ken, the mascot of Miyazaki Prefecture, which consists of three animals in Figure 7 that were re-branded as superheroes in Figure 8.



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Figure 7 Mascot of Miyazaki

Figure 8 Mascot of Miyazaki after Rebranding

This re-branding is not done without purpose. The re-branding of the mascot of Miyazaki was meant to send a message of courage; it was intended to be physiological healing for everyone during the era of pandemic (Occhi, 2022). The MAT Onion Mascot is a local mascot that was made during the MAT program based on the research conducted by (Rand & Snyder, 2021) with the clear message "Onion sometimes makes you cry, but if you prepare it, it will be delicious" also send same encouragement message to every participant about seeing the good side of the pandemic.

With the use of doodle to draw the character for their advertisement, Amul, one of the top leading food branch in India, send various message to its customers, not just encouragement message and campaign for social distancing. Amul also sends satire, comedy, and humanity campaigns while still trying to promote its brand. Even though the doodle advertisement by Amul send various message and meaning, there are still differences in the message that Amul sent before and during the lockdown where the most message that Amul sent during lockdown were social campaign or message of encouragement (Chourisa, 2021). In Indonesia, Tokopedia became one of the companies that

changed their branding strategy in order to maintain the brand's sustainability. Using #DiRumahAjaDulu, Tokopedia positioned itself as a company that cares about the health of its customer by asking them to minimize outdoor activities while at the same time promoting the use of their application to do shopping from home. (Tirtadarma & Darmo, 2020)

A social-media-based campaign using a certain mascot to deliver a safety message to everyone during the pandemic had been done by various organizations around the world. World Health Organization (WHO) working together with Karrot Animation, the creator of the well-known mascot, Peppa-Pig to create a short video campaign for children during the pandemic era (Zebua et al, 2022). Besides Peppa-Pig, World Health Organization also working together with virtual influencer, Knox Frost for a Covid-19 campaign for older audience (Conti et al, 2022). The Government of Japan appointed several representatives as a campaign and countermeasure against Covid, two of them are mascots. One is Pepper, the robotic mascot of Softbank while the other is the virtual idol Hatsune Miku. Through videos and digital pamphlets, both mascots deliver safety and encouragement messages to the people of Japan. Examples of these pamphlets can be seen in Figures 9 and 10.



Figure 9 Pamphlet of Hatsune Miku

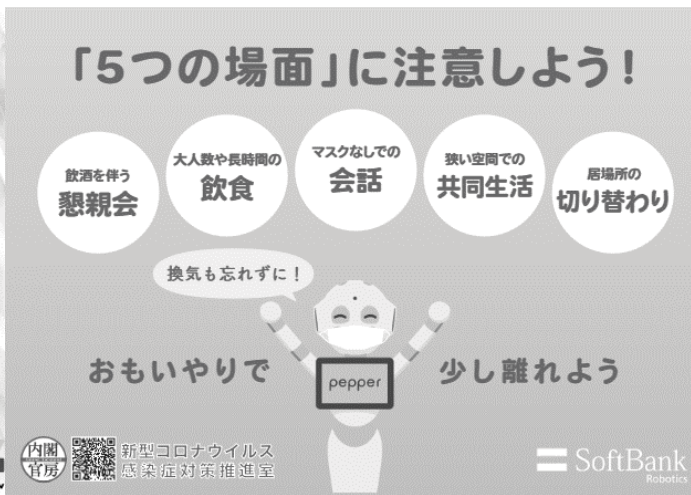


Figure 10 Pamphlet of Pepper

6. Discussion

The development of mascots, in general, is vast and creative. However, through the previous sections, there are a few crucial things that are worth mentioning and discussing.

There are slight differences in how the United States and Japan utilize their mascots. As mentioned, both nations often use mascots as their branding strategy, but in the United States, most of the mascots are used as a representation of specific companies or organizations, most of the time Sports Club. While in Japan, the usage of Mascots is not limited to organization and company but also to represent each of their cities and prefectures for tourism purpose, while at the same time, the United States prefer to use logo and tagline as the representation of their towns as seen in figure 11.

There is nothing wrong with both strategies. Even though the research by (Ko et al., 2022) does mention the vast benefits of using mascots rather than logos as branding strategies, however, there is still not enough evidence to point out the conclusion of whether one of the marketing strategies was worse than the other. These, however, could be exciting research subjects for future research. As mentioned above, besides analyzing the benefits and drawbacks of the usage of the logo by the many states in the United States versus the use of Mascots by the prefecture in Japan. The recent global-scale event, World Olympic Games Mascot, also raises a new question. The research conducted by (Chiabaut, 2021) mentions child participation during the vote but is there any connection between the harmless-looking mascots, Miratowa and Someity, and the children's participation? Or maybe their harmless-looking style was coming from the "Kawaii" style, which is quite popular in Japan, and therefore, the children's participatory have little to zero contribution.



Figure 11 List of State's Logo in the U.S.

After the pandemic hit, many brand owners were having financial struggles (Anderson N. , 2021) and were forced to change their strategies to maintain the sustainability of their brands. Due to social distancing and staying indoors for a long time, most of humankind experiences social withdrawal, which changes how they perceive a brand (Ding & Xu, 2022). Besides the social withdrawal, the internet as advertisement media also gave considerable changes in branding. Social media such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and even Tokopedia have become strategic branding media since the internet can be accessed by everyone, even when a lockdown occurs (Szczepkowski, 2021). However, their effectiveness as advertisement media during the pandemic era requires further research. The ease of use of the internet didn't just change the branding strategy. Because of the pandemic, the term "Work From Home" became popular, and offices and even schools started to undergo these practices. Virtual meeting software such as Zoom, Google Meets, and Microsoft Teams instantly become mandatory software for everyone, regardless of age (Dubey & Tripathi, 2020).

There are enormous differences between a few mascots that have been made or re-made during the pandemic era and before the pandemic area. Most of the mascots made before the pandemic era only represent the company, organization, or event's identity (Lisa, 2014) . Mascots that were made during the pandemic era represent solidarity and unity towards the greater good to fight the pandemic with less portion for their own brand's identity, for example, in the case of Miyazaki Ken (Occhi, 2022), where they used to represent Miyazaki prefecture's unique point but were changed into superhero attire to send encouragement message. The same idea also can be seen in Tokopedia (Tirtadarma & Darmo, 2020) and Amul's Branding Strategies (Chourisa, 2021), where they put their brand's identity before the social message.

Different from prefecture mascots or amul where the brand holder or brand creator is the one who changed a certain aspect of their mascot change to deliver the message or Covid-19 campaign. Social-media based campaign that has been done by both virtual idols and virtual influencers is more of a form of cooperation between two different organization such as WHO and Peppa-Pig (Zebua et al, 2022) or Hatsune Miku with the Government of Japan and most of these mascots did not undergo any drastic changes from their original form. Rather than giving change in design to send the message, these virtual idols and influencers sent their message in the form of verbal speech using video as the main media. This could happen because of how humans perceive virtual idols and influencers as more of celebrity figures (Anderson, et al., 2020) rather than a mascot that represents a brand and could be changed at any time. Although there are differences in the method of delivering the message, both mascots physically or digitally are sharing the same spirit. The spirit of "We are in this together" was strong during the pandemic era, and it also affected mascots made in this era in either way.

7. Conclusion

Based on the conducted research, the result of the study was able to answer both of the before-mentioned research questions as for the research question were :

- Are there any shift in the use and benefits of mascots to brand sustainability during the pandemic era?

Clearly, there is a shift in the use of not just mascots but the whole branding strategy between before and during the pandemic era. Take Amul, for example: before the pandemic era, most of their doodles were about satire, comedy, or the latest world trend. During the pandemic, they use their doodle as a social campaign, such as "Don't forget to wash your hand" or "Turn your light off" to honor the doctor and nurses that work in the frontline during the pandemic. The same strategy has also been done by Hatsune Miku and Knox Frost. In terms of mascots, the same message was used for various kinds of mascots. Rather than representing individual companies, groups, organizations, or events like they used to be, mascots during the pandemic era represent social messages, encouragement messages, and safety messages for its customer with the cost of weakening their brand identity. But do these changes benefit the brand's sustainability? The answer is yes. After all, becoming a sustainability brand means integrating issues from many aspects, such as the environment, society, and economy, into the operations of a business. Based on each branding strategy that has been found in the research shows that there is nothing more important than human health and a sustainable future.

- How is the development of mascot research to date?

From the conducted research, it is safe to say that mascots have been widely used around the globe, even though there are still continuous discussions about how the United States utilizes its mascots and how Japan uses theirs. Nevertheless, in general, innovation and ideas related to the development of mascots are pretty vast. Mascots don't have to be someone inside a hot costume, waving to the passerby, but there is also a mechanized mascot with an electronic part inside it. In today's era where hologram culture is rising, a mascot doesn't even need to be something that can be touched. The existences of virtual idols and virtual influencers are proof that mascot can be fully operated from the computer without any direct human touch.

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