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Perception Differences in Using Brand Mascots on Products and Services between Thai and Japanese Consumers

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Abstract

International companies use brand mascots as a part of their marketing strategies to attract customers and build brand loyalty, therefore understanding the effectiveness of marketing these mascots as well as their effects on consumers depending on individual differences would be important knowledge. This research aims to investigate if there are personal and demographic differences in perceiving mascots, specifically gender, age, nationality (Thai and Japanese), and other relevant factors. The researchers hypothesized that females are more likely to remember mascots and product/services than males, participants below 18 years old are more likely to remember mascots than older participants, and Japanese participants are more likely to remember product/services than Thais but Thai participants will be more likely to buy product/service after knowing mascots compared to Japanese participants. The results show a lack of age differences, some minor gender differences with similarities between Thai and Japanese females towards mascots, and strong national differences in perceiving mascots, while another strong factor for remembering mascots is passion for cartoons. In addition, factors that have encouraged both Thai and Japanese to remember brand mascots for buying items are the cuteness of mascots, seeing the advertisement often on media channels as well as the attractiveness of brand mascot which was colorful than others. The findings also indicate that there is a significance relating to the effect of advertising media of brand mascots on consumer perception.

Keywords: brand-mascots, perceptions, anthropomorphism, brand characters

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ความแตกต่างของการรับรู้ในการใช้ตัวมาสคอตกับสินค้าและบริการระหว่างผู้บริโภคชาวไทยและชาวญี่ปุ่น

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บทคัดย่อ

บริษัทต่างประเทศทั่วโลกใช้สัญลักษณ์มาสคอตเป็นตราสินค้าเพื่อเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของกลยุทธ์การตลาดของพวกเขาที่จะดึงดูดลูกค้าและสร้างความภักดีต่อแบรนด์ ดังนั้น การทำความเข้าใจประสิทธิภาพของการตลาดสัญลักษณ์เหล่านี้ เช่นเดียวกับผลกระทบต่อผู้บริโภคขึ้นอยู่กับความแตกต่างของแต่ละบุคคลจะมีความรู้ที่สำคัญสำหรับบริษัทเหล่านี้ การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวัดความแตกต่างส่วนบุคคลของชาวไทยและชาวญี่ปุ่นในด้านการรับรู้ โดยเฉพาะเพศ อายุ สัญชาติ และปัจจัยอื่น ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้อง นักวิจัยตั้งสมมติฐานว่าเพศหญิงมีแนวโน้มที่จะจำสัญลักษณ์มาสคอตกับสินค้าและบริการได้ดีกว่าเพศชาย ผู้กรอกแบบสอบถามที่อายุต่ำกว่า 18 ปีมีแนวโน้มที่จะจำสัญลักษณ์ได้ดีกว่าผู้กรอกแบบสอบถามที่มีอายุมากกว่า และผู้กรอกแบบสอบถามชาวญี่ปุ่นมีแนวโน้มที่จะจำสินค้าและบริการมากกว่าผู้กรอกแบบสอบถามชาวไทย ผู้กรอกแบบสอบถามชาวไทยจะมีแนวโน้มที่จะซื้อสินค้าและบริการหลังจากที่รับรู้สัญลักษณ์เมื่อเทียบกับชาวญี่ปุ่น ผลที่ได้แสดงถึงความไม่แตกต่างของอายุ เพศ อย่างไรก็ตาม ระหว่างคนไทยและญี่ปุ่นจะมีการจดจำตัวมาสคอตในลักษณะที่ต่างกันด้านปัจจัยที่จดจำสินค้า นอกจากนี้ ปัจจัยที่ทำให้ทั้งผู้กรอกแบบสอบถามชาวไทยและชาวญี่ปุ่นจำสัญลักษณ์ของแบรนด์สำหรับการซื้อสินค้ามีดังนี้ ความน่ารักของตัวละครที่เห็นโฆษณาต่าง ๆ ที่ผ่านสื่อ ความมีสีสันของตัวมาสคอตกว่าแบรนด์มาสคอตตัวอื่น ๆ ซึ่งผลยังระบุว่ามีความสำคัญที่เกี่ยวข้องกับผลกระทบของการใช้สื่อโฆษณาในการรับรู้ของผู้บริโภค

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Introduction

We always see some mascots, cartoon characters, or brand characters being advertised everywhere. How do the marketers use those characters to attract people? Why do they need to use them to create marketing strategies? Do they really attract customers? What are differences between males and females when perceiving these mascots? Do people perceive those mascots in the same ways as the marketers want customers to perceive? Do cultural factors affect the way people perceive those mascots? What are those factors that customers are attracted to? This research aims to find out the answer to those questions.

Anthropomorphic mascots are used by marketers to access the buying power of children and adults (Jacobson, 2008). Anthropomorphic mascots allow consumers to have better interactions or relationships with brands (Patterson, Khogeer, & Hodgson, 2013). In a case where a much-loved anthropomorphic mascot 'Compare the Meerkat' was used in a marketing campaign, Compare the Market Company was able to become more successful through the use of brand mascots (Patterson et al., 2013). According to Kraak and Story (2015), they identified how brand mascots and brand characters are used to promote children's perception and one can call brand mascots in many terms, such as "advertising ambassadors, brand icons, brand-equity or

trade characters and non-celebrity spokes-characters and cartoon media characters can also be called celebrity spokes-characters, which represent a broad range of human or fictional anthropomorphic beings or animated objects" (page 109). The use of mascots provide benefits to brands by creating a strong identity and positive associations (Dotz, Morton, & Lund, 1996; Fournier, 1998). Brand mascots are the intellectual property of companies and used in market entry activities to build the foundation for customer brand loyalty to buy products (Chang, 2014). Consumers accept brands with strong, positive personalities because it is a natural habit for consumers to attach human-like qualities to non-human objects (Freling, Crosno, & Henard, 2010). Woodside (2008) suggested that the brand mascot in a marketer's story should be similar to what the customer's ideal wishes are. Neeley and Schumann (2004) further confirmed that advertising which contained animated mascots generates a high level of attention, product recognition, and liking among young children. However, the perception of the brand mascots is strongly influenced by the culture as people from different cultures may have different opinions toward the same mascots. The objectives of this research are to understand how culture affects the perception of the brand mascots by focusing on Thai and Japanese consumers and to study the effectiveness of using brand mascots in promoting consumer

perception towards products and services.

Objectives

1. To understand how culture affects the perception of the brand mascots by focusing on Thai and Japanese consumer

2. To study the effectiveness of using brand mascots in promoting consumer perception toward products and services

Literature Review

According to Brown (2010), brand mascots have helped the marketers and customers to be closer to one another because brand mascots can make consumers feel happier with corporations. Marketing researchers normally embolden people who work in the field to empower brand mascots with values and personalities that consumers can relate to and eventually build everlasting loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). According to Aiemraaorpakdee (2009), the researcher stated in her paper that the product's reputation is an important factor to compete in the market and what marketers need to do is to build trust and confidence in the brand to their existing customers. Furthermore, in order to build the brand mascot the marketers need to plan by understanding the core competencies of the company and how the product differs from other brands. In the other words, differentiate from competitors

and have a unique value proposition, which could be attractive to the customers and thus the product is marketability to compete with others. In addition, the marketers must integrate a variety of marketing communications in order to attract to target customers with the type of communications that suit customers' interests (Aiemraaorpakdee, 2010; Warapitayut, 2014; Yukantawanithchai, 2010). A brand contains a specific identity based on functional, emotional or symbolic benefits for the customers and a brand's identity should be active and future-oriented (Aaker, 1995). Brands normally can make products different from competitors and they also represent the message that the brands want to send to their customers (Blair & Chiou, 2014). Costa (2010) has indicated that brand mascots with an identity has helped to build up brands such as "Michelin Man, Ronald McDonald, M & M character, and Tony the Tiger."

Mascots can add life into brand personalities and build a level of brand awareness that a logo simply cannot attain (Mascots: Building place in consumers' heart, 2013). Creating a new mascot to encourage social media conversations can send a more effective marketing message (Schultz, 2012). Brand mascots can be used to give information to consumers in television marketing to make them more familiar with the brand products (Fletcher, 2001). Companies and marketers

use brand mascots to build an emotional relationship with children and create brand loyalty for products that will last into adulthood (Connell, Brucks, & Nielsen, 2014). Children learn about mascots through social, media and marketing environments (Richert, Robb, & Smith, 2011). Mascots are associated with memorable slogans, quotes, musical themes and stories, as well as market nostalgia through multiple generations of parent-child interactions that create fun, humor, emotional and positive feelings towards company brands and products (Hemar-Nicolas & Gollety, 2012).

Japan's obvious difference in gender roles varies from the gender values of Asian countries that are exposed to Japanese cartoons (Hofstede, 1984). Television role models can affect girls' confidence and determination to succeed (Atkin & Miller, 1975). A study on US television cartoons, including some from Japan, also found a dominance of boys' over girls' cartoons (Thompson & Zerbinose, 1997). Hofstede (1984) categorized culture into multiple dimensions which can provide some cultural diversity insights. Japanese exports are not only products but include popular music, TV shows and magazines to represent Japanese qualities. Blair and Chiou (2014) showed that cultural and gender differences play a significant role in consumer perceptions of brands. This means that cultural and gender dimensions can be used to predict specific

consumer behaviors, which can be helpful for marketing brands.

Methodology

A quantitative method has been applied in this study. In this paper, the researchers know that the brand-mascots are great for promoting both products and services in order to build awareness or boost up the recognition of companies. Since the way which marketers use mascots has already been described, the desire exists to know more about the cultural differences between Thai and Japanese people by using survey for data gathering technique as well as measuring some of the information during the data collection process. The research studies what the participants were more likely to think when recalling their memories, which helped the researchers to reexamine and reflect on the data and concepts simultaneously and interactively. The main methodology is to collect the data by using both online and offline surveys through popular places in Bangkok, such as universities, high-schools, Thai companies, Japanese organizations in Thailand, Japanese who stay in Thailand, and Japanese organizations in Japan which were distributed via email to the Thai-Japanese networks and the results were received online through the use of Google Form. The population which was identified through online questionnaires is Thai and Japanese people between 18-60 years old who had seen mascots before. Because the

size of the population is unknown, we treat this case as an infinite population size. Based on Yamane's sample size formula, the minimum sample size is 400 but actual collecting data was more than 400 participants in order to prevent incomplete surveys affecting the data. Yamane's formula treats the population as a homogeneous population, but Thai and Japanese people are significantly different. Therefore, we treat Thai and Japanese people as separated populations and we collect 500 samples from each group. The data collection can have some errors such as incomplete data. To protect from the effect of any errors, we added 100 samples to each group as a buffer which is 25% of the sample size. Therefore, the sample is 500 for Thai people and 500 for Japanese people.

The questionnaire is designed to measure on gender, age, passion in cartoon, type of mascots, brand awareness, social media, communication channels, realistic and unrealistic colors of mascots, and interactiveness had been verified using IOC test from three experts in the field of communication, Japanese culture, and marketing. The questionnaire is also tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha and the result is 0.67. The sample is selected by using the convenient sampling method.

According to the survey, there are 2 versions of questionnaires; Thai language and Japanese language, which were verified through

back translation. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to study the effect of cultural differences toward the perception of brand mascots by focusing on the differences in perception between Thai and Japanese consumers. The literatures have been reviewed as the fundamental concepts in the research. The research used a dozen brand mascots all around the world which included both international brands such as Michelin, Kellogg's and famous domestic brands in Thailand and Japan. All measuring were tested using Chi-square method with a 5% significant level.

Results of the Research

The results show a cultural difference in how a country's media in this case Thailand or Japan, affects the ability to remember brand mascots. Thai and Japanese cultural differences also have an influence on how remembering a brand mascot can help to remember products and brand names. The sample size was 1,000 participants with 500 respondents each from Thailand and Japan. However, 43 participants were eliminated because of incomplete questionnaires and thus the convenience sample consists of 497 Thai and 460 Japanese or 957 participants in total. They range from under 18 to more than 60 years of age, with majority of Female Thai respondents (30%) ranging from 33 to 45 years old and male Thai respondents (25%) ranging from 45-60 years old, whereas with majority of female Japanese

respondents (58%) ranging from 18-25, and 33-45 for male Japanese respondents and ranging from 26 to 60 years old (69%).

Table 1 Remembering Brand Mascot Percentage through Each Media to Compare Thai-Japanese

Rank	THAI (n=497)	%	Rank	JAPANESE (n=460)	%
1	Poster	95%	5	Poster	56%
2	Mascot in Product Exhibition	94%	3	Mascot in Product Exhibition	58%
3	Product's packaging	91%	3	Product's packaging	58%
4	TV Advertisement	89%	4	TV Advertisement	57%
5	Online Advertisement	89%	4	Online Advertisement	57%
6	Leaflet	88%	2	Leaflet	60%
7	Billboard	87%	1	Billboard	74%

From Table 1, the results show that Thai participants can remember brand mascot through poster, exhibition and product's packaging as the top three media rather than TV advertisement or online advertisement. While in Japan the top three media which help Japanese people remember the brand mascot are billboard, leaflet and product's packaging. However, when comparing both countries, using posters for Thai is the most common

channel for remembering brand mascots, while for Japanese, it is the least common channel to do so. Whereas using mascot in product exhibition and product packaging are the third rank for Japanese participants to remember the brand mascots in the market. Therefore, the results indicate that there is a significance relating to the effect of advertising media of brand mascots on consumer perception.

Table 2 Interest in Cartoon and Ability to Remember Brand Mascot Characters in Thailand (n=497)

Interest	Frequency of people who can remember brand mascot characters		Total	Chi-square value	p-value
	YES	NO			
Cartoon Lover Count (%)	321 (86.52%)	50 (13.48%)	371 (100%)	17.963	0.000
Not a Cartoon Lover Count (%)	88 (69.84%)	38 (30.16%)	126 (100%)		
Total Count (%)	409 (82.29%)	88 (17.71%)	497 (100%)		

In Thailand, out of 497 respondents, 86.52% of respondents who claim that they are cartoon lovers can remember brand mascots correctly, while 69.84% of respondents who are not cartoon lovers can do so. The calculated

value of Chi-square test statistic is 17.963 at a 95% level of confidence. This shows that the passion in cartoon is significantly different from each other when measuring ability to remember brand mascots in Thailand.

Table 3 Interest in Cartoon and Ability to Remember Brand Mascot Characters in Japan (n=460)

Interest	Frequency of people who can remember brand mascot characters		Total	Chi-square value	p-value
	YES	NO			
Cartoon Lover Count (%)	136 (45.95%)	160 (54.05%)	296 (100%)	3.781	0.0518
Not a Cartoon Lover Count (%)	60 (36.59%)	104 (63.41%)	164 (100%)		
Total Count (%)	196 (42.61%)	264 (57.39%)	460 (100%)		

Among the Japanese respondents, out of 460 respondents who responded to the online questionnaires, 45.95% of respondents who claim that they are cartoon lovers can remember brand mascot characters correctly, while 36.59% of respondents who are not cartoon lovers can do so. The calculated value of Chi-square test statistic is 3.781 at a 95% level of confidence. This shows that the passion

in cartoon is not significantly different from each other when measuring ability to remember brand mascot characters in Japan.

In summary, table 2 and table 3 have indicated that the passion in cartoon is significantly related to ability to remember brand mascot characters in Thailand, however, this result do not show in Japan samples.

Table 4 Remembering Brand Mascot Has Helped Remembering Product & Brand Name in Thai Female (n=297)

Female	Frequency of people who can recognize and remember brand mascot		Total	Chi-square value	p-value
	Remember n (%)	Don't remember			
Remember mascot Count (%)	222 (88.10%)	30 (11.90%)	252 (100%)	20.937	0.000
Don't remember mascot Count (%)	26 (60.47%)	17 (39.53%)	43 (100%)		
Total Count (%)	248 (83.50%)	47 (15.82%)	297 (100%)		

Out of 297 Thai female respondents, 88.10% of respondents who can recognize and remember brand mascots eventually remember products and brand names, while 60.47% of respondents who cannot recognize and remember brand mascots can do so.

The calculated value of Chi-square test statistic is 20.937 at a 95% level of confidence. This reveals that remembering brand mascot is significantly related to remembering product and brand name in Thai female participants.

Table 5 Remembering Brand Mascot Has Helped Remembering Product & Brand Name in Japanese Female

Female	Frequency of people who can recognize and remember brand mascot		Total	Chi-square value	p-value
	Remember n (%)	Don't remember n (%)			
Remember mascot Count (%)	68 (54.40%)	57 (45.60%)	125 (100%)	13.031	0.000
Don't remember mascot Count (%)	56 (33.33%)	112 (66.67%)	168 (100%)		
Total Count (%)	124 (42.18%)	169 (57.48%)	294 (100%)		

Out of 294 Japanese female respondents, 54.40% of respondents who can recognize and remember brand mascot eventually remember product and brand name, while 33.33% of respondents who cannot recognize and remember brand mascot can do so. The calculated value of Chi-square test statistic is 13.031 at a 95% level of confidence. This shows

that remembering brand mascot is significantly related to remembering product and brand name in Japanese female.

In conclusion, table 4 and table 5 have shown that remembering brand mascot is significantly related to remembering product and brand name in both Thai and Japanese females.

Table 6 Nationalities and Ability to Remember Brand Mascot Characters

Nationalities	Frequency of people who can recognize and remember brand mascot characters			Don't remember all	Total	Chi-square value	p-value
	Remember both product & service and brand name	Remember only product/service	Remember only brand				
Thai Count (%)	320 (64%)	77 (15%)	47 (9%)	53 (11%)	497 (100%)	101.956	0.000
Jap. Count (%)	155 (34%)	84 (18%)	103 (22%)	118 (26%)	460 (100%)		
Total Count (%)	475 (50%)	161 (17%)	150 (16%)	171 (18%)	957 (100%)		

Out of all 957 respondents, 64% of Thai respondents can recognize and remember products and brand names, while 34% of Japanese respondents who cannot recognize and remember brand mascots can do so. The calculated value of Chi-square test statistic is 101.956 at a 95% level of confidence. This shows that the responses between nationalities are significantly different in terms of remembering products/services. However, we find that Thai

participants are more likely to remember the products/services comparing to Japanese participants regardless of nationalities.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our objectives to understand the culture affects the perception of the brand mascots by focusing on Thai and Japanese consumers and to study the effectiveness of using brand mascots in promoting consumer perception

toward products and services were met to a certain degree, but only a few factors showed statistical significance. The results also indicate that there is a significance relating to the effect of advertising media of brand mascots on consumer perception. Neeley and Schumann (2004) confirmed that advertising which contained brand mascots generate a high level of attention, product recognition, and liking among young children. Brand mascots can be brought to life by creating complete stories based on these mascots through social media websites like Facebook (Schultz, 2012). In television marketing, brand mascots can be used to give information to consumers to make them more familiar with the popular brand (Fletcher, 2001).

From the analyses of results in the study, Chi-square test statistical analysis showed significance for a few factors, which were: Passion in cartoon was significantly different from each other when measuring ability to remember brand mascots in Thailand. Passion in cartoons could originate from participants' childhood where young children preferred to watch cartoons compared to other television programs, resulting in better recognition of brand-mascots (Thompson & Zerbinose, 1997). Remembering brand mascot is significantly related to remembering product and brand name for both Thai and Japanese females. Television role models can affect girls'

confidence and determination to succeed (Atkin & Miller, 1975) and females have better recollection of brand mascots than males. The responses between nationalities are significantly different in terms of remembering products/services. We find that Thais are more likely to remember the products/services compared to Japanese participants. There is a relevance to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory about differences in national cultures (Hofstede, 1984). Factors that include age, interactiveness and unrealistic colors of mascots are shown to be insignificant to remembering mascots while gender differences for the factors are also shown to be much less than hypothesized. A lack of correlation was discovered as the answer to most of our research hypotheses. The results confirm the theories that passion in cartoons is important for being able to remember brand mascots, a possibility of gender differences in being able to remember brand mascots may exist, and there are national differences in remembering products/services. Other variables that we measured in this study are age differences between those below 18 and those above 18, type of mascots, brand awareness, social media, communication channels, realistic and unrealistic colors of mascots, and interactiveness.

Furthermore, our study has also measured which factors that customers remember about buying the brand mascot products/services,

with interesting results from both countries. In Thailand, the most effective factor that helped them remember was brand mascots being “Cute,” which attracted the Thai customers more than Japanese customers. This is followed by the brand mascots being “often seen” on communication channels regardless of what channels were used. In addition, “the brand mascot colors being outstanding” helped them remember the products and services.

Future Research Implications

A few researches are discussed including:

(1) Factor analysis statistic could be used to answer additional research questions in future studies and a more detailed questionnaire could be used to obtain more knowledge. (2) Most of the results in this research study were not significant so questions relating to these variables could be examined in more details in future research. (3) The research results should be guideline for later study in other countries in order to understand cross-cultural perspectives in using mascots for marketing. Lastly, (4) Increasing sample size should help the researcher be able to find more statistically significant results.

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