ULTIMART

VISUALISING AN ACADEMIC INSTITUTION'S IMAGE THROUGH BRAND MASCOTS: PRADITA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *A student's choice of an academic institution is influenced by the reputation and public perception of the university; these factors are often shaped by brand awareness. As Pradita University is a recently established institution, it is essential to increase its brand awareness and image to facilitate a positive perception among prospective students. The researchers have proposed that the utilization of brand mascots could serve as a strategy to increase brand awareness as existing studies have highlighted the advantages of brand mascots in this regard, albeit not in the context of academic institutions. As a foundation for the hypothesis and design as well as to understand the viability of the proposed strategy, descriptive-conceptual qualitative methods in the form of in-depth interviews and literature reviews on character design and colour palettes were conducted. This research will discuss the feasibility and effectiveness of incorporating a brand mascot to increase brand awareness and image within an academic institution while delving into design elements that contribute to a memorable mascot based on the collected data. The outcome of this research is a mascot that is expected to increase brand awareness and image through market implementation and interaction. Future research could further explore the long-term effectiveness and influence of brand mascots on brand awareness.*

Keywords: *academic institutions; brand mascots; brand image; brand awareness.*

Introduction

Tertiary education holds great value among Indonesian youths as evidenced by the rapid growth, which shows no signs of stopping, in the number of Indonesians with higher education (Kyrychenko, 2018). As of 2022, Indonesia has 4004 active academic institutions (Sadya, 2023). Hence, it is no surprise that the market

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will try to meet the demand. As a new university established in August 2017, Pradita University is new to the market. However, it must compete with other universities with years of history and a well-established reputation among the general public. Amid competition between public and private academic institutions, Pradita University needs to establish itself in the public's mind and create an image that differentiates it from the competition.

Marketing Pradita University through brand mascots means considering the factors influencing a student's choice of university. A study by Harahap and Amanah (2019) on factors influencing a student's choice of university showed that the factors ranged from price to reputation. Nonetheless, the scope of this study focuses on branding. Thus, factors such as price point, location or facilities cannot be accounted for; however, the university's image and reputation are factors where branding can be beneficial. Additionally, a study by Harahap et al. (2018) has also shown that a university's reputation positively influences a student's choice of university. A brand's reputation depends on multiple factors, including public perception. To form an opinion about the university, people must first be aware of its existence, underscoring the importance of brand awareness, which can be understood as the public's ease of recognition and recall of a brand and its distinctiveness. (Mulyono, 2016).

Considering Pradita University is new and unranked, it has neither built a strong reputation nor brand awareness among the public. Increasing Pradita University's brand awareness among the public ensures that the university's reputation and perception of the university are ones that the university creates. To further outline the importance of brand awareness, in increasing brand awareness, the university's brand image will be directly affected as a company's reputation could be recognised

by its image and identity (Harahap & Amanah, 2019). Brand Image is defined as "the perception and preference of consumers towards a brand, reflected by the various associations that live in the memory of consumers about the brand" (Wijaya, 2013, p.58), and studies have shown that the more aware the customer is of a brand, the easier it is to create a positive brand image (Hyun & Kim, 2011; Yang & Petersen, 2004, as cited in Mulyono, 2016). Furthermore, Mulyono (2016)'s study on the impact of brand awareness and image on university choice proved that brand awareness resulted in an increased brand image, making it easier for prospective students to create a positive perception causing the value of the products and services to be perceived more positively resulting in higher satisfaction. Thus, Increasing the university's brand awareness will strengthen its brand image, the hypothesis the researchers have proposed to increase said brand awareness is the utilization of brand mascots.

Brand mascots may be the correct strategy to increase brand awareness and image for Pradita University as multiple studies have discussed its benefits in these factors. Brand mascots can be considered brand icons (Kraak & Story, 2014) representing a brand to its market, allowing the brand to increase brand awareness while interacting with the market (Malik & Gupta, 2014), further strengthening its identity in the customer's mind, through easier visualization. Still, in the current era of advertising, celebrity endorsements are the popular choice for increasing brand awareness; therefore, is it not more beneficial for the university to use celebrities? A study by Pairoa and Arunrangsiwed (2016) to compare the effectiveness of brand mascots against celebrities in aspects such as the source credibility scale (SCS), identification, reputation, memory, and unintentional effect, proved that brand mascots might be the better strategy for the university. The

results showed that in the context of SCS, which refers to the credibility of the endorsers, the brand mascot is regarded as more trustworthy and qualified. The study also discussed the mascot's benefits when it came to increasing brand identification and brand reputation. However, the study has shown that the benefits are felt only when the market is aware of and identifies with the mascot. Strategies such as social network stickers for consumers to use help increase customer awareness and identification of the mascot and increase emotional affinity and brand awareness (Pairoa & Arunrangsiwed, 2016).

Furthermore, in the current era of digital media, most marketing is done on social media and based on the researcher's interview with Pradita University's Head of Marketing, Anom Bayu, S.Si., M. Sc.; This fact also stands true for Pradita University. Mr Anom states that Pradita University does most of its marketing through online platforms such as social media or websites (Bayu, A, personal communication, 20 June 2023). This fact further proves the relevance of using mascots to strengthen brand awareness, as it has been shown that consumers like to connect and interact with mascots through social media, thus making it a powerful tool to increase awareness and likeability (Hoolwerff, 2014). For those reasons, the researcher believes that a brand mascot may be the correct strategy to strengthen Pradita's brand image and awareness to appeal to the general public and differentiate it from its competitors. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How to visualise an academic institution through a brand mascot that represents its brand image?

2. What mascot design can be effective in increasing brand awareness while still resonating with the university's target market?

Methodology

To establish a foundation for the hypothesis and design of the mascot as well as its viability, the researchers employed descriptive-conceptual qualitative methods to conduct comprehensive research. The study began with two in-depth interviews as seen in Fig. 1. involving the Head of Marketing at Pradita University and an expert in the field of mascot and character design who has requested that his real name not be disclosed therefore, will be referred to by their professional name, Kukudie or also known as Dihong. He is known as an illustrator from China who focuses on character and mascot design. Following the interviews, an extensive literature review of academic journals no older than ten years will examine theories on effective character design and colour palettes.

Figure 1. 1. Proof of Interview (Left: Anom, Right: Kukudie)
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

The rationale behind applying these qualitative methods was to allow the researchers to collect data through interviews and literature reviews of existing theories. Said literature reviews are essential to conduct as it will be used to complement the results of the interviews; additionally, the reviews will allow the researchers to gain insight into more effective character design and color palette choices. The collected data will then be presented as a description of factors to be analysed in the subsequent section. These methods allowed for a reinterpretation of concepts and keywords that helped create

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a stronger argument for the hypothesis and allowed the researchers to design a mascot based on a comprehensive understanding of the brand and the core theories that became the foundation for creating a compelling mascot character.

Head of Marketing at Pradita

The initial interview was conducted on the 23rd of June 2023 with the Head of Marketing at Pradita University, Anom Bayu, S.Si., M. Sc., who is responsible for leading the sales and marketing team. Through developing marketing communication strategies to increase the brand awareness of the university, Anom provides deeper insights into the university's target demographic, marketing strategies, and the viability of incorporating a mascot in the university's current marketing plan.

Firstly, Anom established that Pradita University's primary target market is final-year high school students aged 18 to 20. Due to the young age of the market, Anom believes that incorporating a mascot into the university's marketing may be the right strategy. He states that the mascot can help bridge the communication gap between the university and the market in delivering information about the university. The mascot helps the information be more appealing and digestible to the younger audience. Additionally, Anom states that as the mascot will be used as a marketing tool to appeal to the market, they should be prioritised throughout the design process; therefore, the design should be identifiable and relatable to the market. However, while relatability to the market is essential, the mascot design should also highlight the university's image. This image is of a real enterprise university which highlights its ability to provide a strong foundation in theory while providing hands-on experiences in each industry.

In discussions of future implementations and mascot effectiveness, Anom states that the University does its marketing through school visitations, exhibitions, or online promotions through social platforms. Therefore, the mascot will be implemented through the university's social platforms or as signboards or merchandise that can be given out to prospective students during school visitations or exhibitions. This will help in the market's recognition and awareness of the existence of Pradita University and it's mascot, as the benefits of a mascot toward the university's brand awareness can only be felt if the market is aware of the mascot's existence. Considering all this, Anom believes that incorporating a mascot will help the university stand out from its competitors while increasing its recognisability in the market.

Character and Mascot Designer

The next interview was conducted on the 13th of July 2023 with Kukudie, a character and mascot designer based in China. Kukudie provides an experienced view in character and mascot design, highlighted through his work in designing characters for startup brands and collaborating with Giordano, a well-established apparel brand, to release an Asia-wide collection with his character ODK Monkey.

In discussions of brand mascots, Kukudie believes that mascots help build a memorable image that represents the brand while strengthening the personality and style of the brand; sequentially forming a deeper impression in the market hence increasing brand awareness. However, these benefits are only present with well-designed mascots that represent the brand well, therefore certain factors need to be considered. Firstly, the age demographic of the target market plays an essential role in defining the basic features

of the character such as in determining whether the features lean towards cute or mature. Secondly is the scale of the brand; the scale of the company determines the amount of discernible features the character should have. Smaller-scale brands should include more than two discernible features to prioritise standing out among the competitors however, larger-scale brands should instead prioritise concise and clear features that complement the brand in establishing a clear and lasting image. Lastly, the colour palette of a character should be determined based on existing brand colours to ensure a unified image throughout the brand.

While features, such as facial expressions or character anatomy, are crucial in defining a memorable character. Characters benefit from background stories by giving them more life, making them more memorable. Future character extensions will benefit from backstories as well since the character can be extended based on the story which makes for a livelier and more complete character. Following the discussion of future design extensions, Kukudie states that familiarising the character with the market is essential and thus can be done through launching side products to increase awareness of the character or through updating content of the character on social platforms. Regularly updating content in the form of products, illustrations, character design extensions, or even mini-animation to help establish a favourable and attractive image of the character in the market's mind. Additionally, regular character updates will be advantageous in maintaining the brand image and activity while increasing awareness of both the brand and the character.

Mascot Character Design

Character design is an inclusive term that encompasses both visual and written media, with an emphasis on the visual aspect. Nevertheless, in the context of brand mascots, character-market connection is vital for success (Nieminen, 2017).

The overall visual should be prioritised before the features. A study by Jiyavorananda et al. (2016) indicated that common animals often seen as mascots with larger heads and human-like body frames are perceived as more friendly and familiar. On the other hand, unusual combinations, such as mixing a cow and a bird, while eye-catching, may be deemed unfamiliar and less friendly (Jiyavorananda et al., 2016). In terms of form, a study by Fathoni (2023) showed that circular body shapes are preferred, while another analysis by Hotogi and Hagiwara (2015) showed shorter legs tend to be favored. In terms of features, the aforementioned study by Hotogi and Hagiwara (2015) showed that circular black eyes are preferred, whil another analysis by Ito and Yamashita (2014) showed that rounded noses and animal-like mouths contribute positively in terms of viewer preference and cuteness and are indicated to create a good impression.

Colour Palette

Colours play a pivotal role in shaping a character's impression (Hotogi & Hagiwara, 2015). For mascots, it's crucial to align colour choices with the brand's existing palette for consistency (Henderson, 2021). Pradita University's brand colours—green, red, orange, and yellow—evoke specific emotions: green suggests freshness, optimism, honesty, and youth; red conveys confidence, vitality, and passion; orange signifies cheerfulness, creativity, and success, while yellow represents wisdom, joy, and intellect (Tillman, 2011, p. 92-93, as cited in Henderson, 2021).

Tint, shade, hue, or saturation can

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dramatically alter these emotions (Tillman, 2011, p.94, as cited in Henderson, 2011). Warm colour palettes are linked to friendly and cheerful characters, while cute and friendly ones often use more saturated colors (Hotogi & Hagiwara, 2015). If necessary, slight adjustments in warmth and saturation of brand colours can ensure the mascot's intended perception. In terms of colouring style, viewers tend to prefer flat shading (Fathoni, 2023).

Result

The objective of this research is to study the viability and effectiveness of implementing a brand mascot in an academic institution's branding. While it has been discussed to be both effective and desirable, the multiple benefits of implementing a mascot can only be felt by considering certain factors in terms of design, colour, and implementation.

The Design Process

In the initial design process, the mascot was decided to be an otter named Adita. Animal mascots are generally considered more friendly and familiar; however, the chosen animal must already be commonly used. Otters can be considered as a popular mascot choice as seen through multiple mascots in Fig. 2 such as Susaki, Japan, California State University Monterey Bay, and even Singapore's primary food safety mascot. Additionally, several otters are famously known among the students for roaming around the campus area. These solidified the otter as the final choice and concurrently created an opportunity for a backstory to help create a memorable character with more life while opening opportunities for character extensions. The story behind Adita plays on the fact that the otter roams the campus; therefore, Adita is made to be a student at

Pradita University who knows the ins and outs of campus life and will accompany the students in navigating campus life.
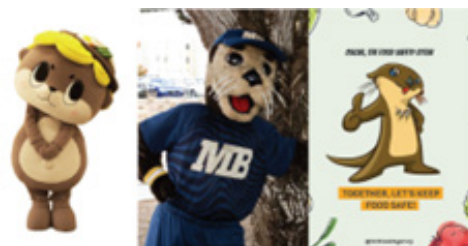

Figure 2. Other Otter mascots (First: Susaki, Japan; Second: California State University Monterey Bay; Third: Singapore's food safety mascot) (Source: First: https://yurukyara.fandom.com/wiki/Shinjo-kun; Second: https://csumb.edu/communications/brand-visual-identity/monte-rey/; Third: https://www.facebook.com/SGFoodAgency/photos/a.123453477731188/2353628978046949/?type=3)

The university's target age demographic played an essential role in deciding the overall look of the mascot. The market of final-year high school students aged 18 to 20 resulted in the decision to make Adita appear cute and friendly instead of serious and mature. However, since Pradita University is considered a large-scale brand, the design of Adita prioritised clear and concise features to complement the university in creating a lasting image.

Adita is primarily based on an Asian short-clawed otter as the species is mainly found in Southeast Asia and is the otter roaming around campus. This meant the initial design process involved breaking down the anatomy of an Asian short-clawed otter and deciding on the main features that made it discernible as seen in Fig. 3.

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Figure 3. Asian Small-Clawed Otter Anatomy Break-down
(Source: https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/mammals/otters-of-the-world/)

Based on the breakdown, there were six defining features:

A. Small triangular ears that face outwards

B. Elongated straight torso with short round hips

C. Short legs with feet that look connected to the hips

D. Short forearms

E. flat-nosed face with a marking that extends from the face to the chest

F. Thick tail base tapering to a point

To ensure that Adita would be recognisable as an otter, these six features were incorporated stylistically into Adita's base design, as seen in Fig. 4.

In defining Adita's fundamental body shape, circular forms were used as the public viewed it as more preferable. Nonetheless, one of the distinguishable features of an otter is its elongated torso with short rounded hips. Therefore, his torso was intentionally kept long and straight to ensure the recognisability of the species, though the hips were made more circular to ensure a softened silhouette. His other body parts, such as his hands, tail, and ears, were made consistent with the other aforementioned features. In the case of his legs, there is a public preference for characters with short legs; thus, Adita's short legs were emphasised to showcase a cuter image. Although Adita's overall characteristics closely resemble a real otter, his head was intentionally made larger, and his body frame was designed to appear more human-like as these two traits are seen as more friendly and familiar.

The features on Adita's face are key in ensuring the intended image is perceived. Therefore, Adita's face consists of circular black eyes, a rounded triangular nose, and an animal-like mouth, as these features are frequently evaluated as cute and are indicated to create a good impression. Additionally, as facial expressions can be one aspect in creating a memorable character, Adita's face, while simple, can be altered to create numerous expressions as seen in Fig. 5.

Figure 4. Adita's Base Design
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

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Figure 5. Adita's Facial Expressions
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

Adita's Colour Palette

Adita is primarily brown with a cream-coloured marking that extends from the face to the chest. Although the Asian short-clawed otter is predominantly dark brown, Adita's fur has been made into a warmer and more saturated brown. Friendly, cheerful and cute characters are often characterised by warmer but saturated colour palettes as discussed in a previously mentioned study. Adita is also coloured with a flat shading style as it has been shown to be preferred. Additionally, it is important to note that Pradita University has a brand colour palette. Thus, these colours must be included in Adita to establish a unified image throughout the brand. Pradita University's colour palette consists of green, red, orange and yellow as seen in their logo in Fig. 6.

Figure 6. Pradita University's Logo
(Source: https://pradita.university/#/)

To showcase these colours on Adita as well as emphasise his student status, Adita wears a blazer modelled after the university's blazer seen in Fig. 7.
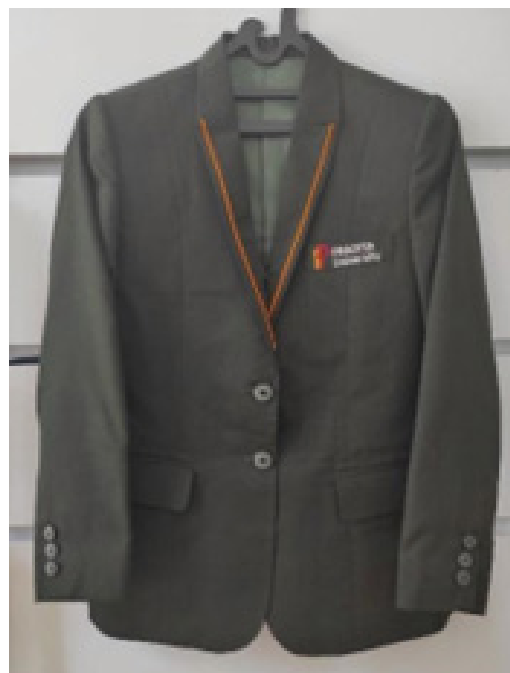

Figure 7. Pradita University's Blazer
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

However, unlike the official blazer with Pradita's logo on the right chest, the logo on Adita's jacket has been moved to his hat to ensure better visibility. In addition to the official blazer of the university, his look is completed with a bag, a hat, and a pair of sneakers as seen in Fig. 8.

Figure 8. Adita's Character Sheet
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

His final attire's colour palette seen in Fig. 9 is made to complement the university's established colour palette. Green is used predominantly as it is a colour that evokes feelings of optimism, honesty, and youth. Secondly, orange is used as a secondary colour as it evokes feelings of cheerfulness, creativity and success. Lastly, red is scarcely used as while it does evoke positive feelings of confidence; the colour does not reinforce the cute and friendly image that Adita is meant to represent. Furthermore, excess use of the colour can easily be perceived negatively or as too strong or mature.
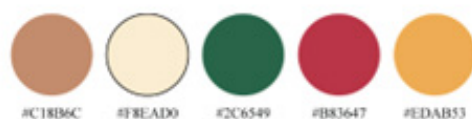

Figure 9. Adita's Colour Palette
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

Implementation into brand

In creating Adita's design, the identifiability and the public's awareness of Adita are essential to his effectiveness in delivering information and messages in an appealing and digestible manner. The more the market emotionally connects with Adita and is aware of him, the more trustworthy and qualified he will be in his purpose to convey messages as a brand representation. Thus, the foundation of an effective mascot is proper implementation into the brand.

Pradita University as a brand wants to highlight the university's image as a real enterprise university that provides hands-on industry experience through its fourteen diverse study majors. Therefore, fourteen different attire variations corresponding to each major's industry have been made to ensure that the university can easily implement Adita in content highlighting its hands-on learning regard-less of the industry or major being discussed. Additionally, the addition of these variations ensures that students of different backgrounds and education can also identify with Adita. The different attires seen in Fig. 10. from Top to bottom; left to right, are:

1. Accounting
2. Architecture,
3. Civil Engineering,
4. Information Technology
5. Culinary
6. Business Management
7. Masters of Information Technology
8. Retail Management
9. Visual Communication Design
10. Urban Planning
11. Business Information System
12. Hospitality & Tourism
13. Interior Design
14. Institut Français

Figure 10. Alternate Attires for Majors
(Personal Research Documentation)

Regularly implementing Adita in the university's social platform content will allow the market to be aware of him, in turn increasing his likeability.

Other than social platform content, the university also markets itself through exhibitions. Showcasing Adita as part of the exhibition booth setup, as seen in Fig. 11, creates an opportunity for prospective students to be aware of his status as a university mascot.
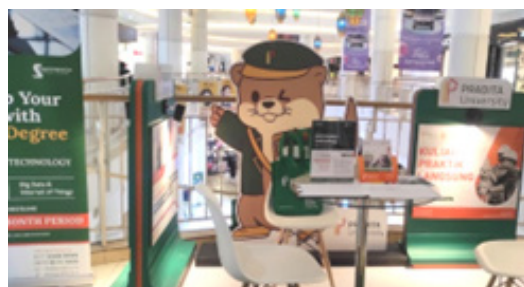

Figure 11. Pradita University's Booth
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

Additionally, producing content in the form of products that can be given out to prospective students will also help establish a favourable and attractive image of the character in the market's mind. As Adita's image is of a cute and friendly mascot, the products produced also need to mirror this. Thus, an example of a product that can be used to introduce Adita to the market is a plushie as seen in Fig. 12.

Figure 12. Adita Plushie
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

While introducing Adita to the market of prospective students is crucial to his success as a mascot, allowing the currently enrolled students to familiarise themselves with him is equally as important. One method the university can implement other than through social platforms is to include Adita in various signboards throughout the university, as seen in Fig 13. The aforementioned implementations will allow the university to benefit from the incorporation of Adita as a university brand mascot.

Figure 13. Sign in Pradita University's Library
(Source: Personal Research Documentation)

Discussion

This research has provided notable arguments in favour of the effectiveness and benefits of implementing a mascot to represent an academic institution's brand image. Though said benefits can only be felt when the mascot is designed and implemented appropriately. As Adita is in its early stages of implementation, it's hard to argue on its long-term effectiveness however, future research on the topic of academic institution brand mascots' long-term effectiveness and impact on brand awareness could be studied. The implication of this future research matters, as with the evergrowing tertiary education market, newer universities need to innovate new and creative marketing methods to stand out.

Conclusion

The reputation and image of an institution play a crucial role in students' choices. Currently, Pradita University lacks a strong reputation and image, possibly due to limited brand awareness. To address this issue, researchers suggest introducing a brand mascot to elevate brand awareness and subsequently improve the university's brand image and reputation. Previous research supports the idea that brand mascots can positively affect brand perception.

To evaluate the viability and benefits of implementing a mascot at Pradita University, interviews and literature reviews were conducted. The Head of Marketing at Pradita University believes the mascot as a means to enhance communication with the target demographic of final-year high school students aged 18-20 and increase the university's visibility. However, the mascot's success depends on proper design and implementation. A following interview with an experienced character and mascot designer highlighted key insights into crafting a memorable mascot, including considerations for the age group, brand scale and colour scheme. Additionally, giving the character a backstory and providing regular updates were recommended to increase awareness.

The chosen mascot for Pradita University is Adita, an Asian short-clawed otter, aligning with the preference for friendly and familiar animal mascots. Adita's design incorporates elements favoured by the public, including circular shapes, short legs, black eyes, a rounded triangular nose, and an animal-like mouth. Adita's colour palette primarily draws from the university's brand colours but has been adjusted to radiate warmth and saturation, qualities commonly associated with friendly, cute, and cheerful characters.

Successful mascot implementation is crucial for its effectiveness. Thus, fourteen different outfits corresponding to each major offered by the university have been created for Adita. This ensures seamless integration into marketing materials across various majors and industries. Additionally, Adita serves as an exhibition booth decoration and will be featured in merchandise to engage with prospective and current students.

Lastly, Adita has been perceived well and incorporated successfully into the university's marketing. However, the

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shortcomings of this study mainly focus on the fact that it is hard to ensure the long-term effectiveness and benefits of Adita as it is Adita has only been implemented for a short duration of time. Therefore, the researchers hope that future research on the long-term benefits of brand mascot implementation into academic institutions can be studied further.

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