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COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY MASCOTS IN INDONESIA: ANALYSIS OF VISUAL IDENTITY AND AUDIENCE ACCEPTANCE

Viny Fitria[1]
Marina Wardaya[2]

Abstract: *This study investigates Indonesian university mascots as instruments of visual identity and branding through a descriptive-comparative qualitative methodology employing Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. Methodological study conduct used Roland Barthes semiotic framework to examine how visual element represent institutional ideology. The analysis included four mascots: YUCCA (Ciputra University), ROGA (Bandung Institute of Technology), BRONE (Brawijaya University), and CAKRA (Malang State University). Data collection encompassed visual documentation, institutional philosophy analyses, social media monitoring, and surveys involving 50 participants from East Java. The results show that good mascots need three things: a unique look, a philosophy that fits with the values of the institution, and regular activity on social media. Mascots that include elements of local culture, like CAKRA and ROGA, are more real than those that are based on Western culture, like YUCCA. The research demonstrates a dialectical relationship between academic credibility and popular aesthetics, affirming that mascots serve as semiotic agents that construct institutional myths rather than mere decorative components. Visual design alone is not enough, it needs to be strategically activated. This is shown by BRONE's low engagement even though the design was clear. According to the survey, 86.5% of respondents are very familiar with mascots through social media. They like simple shapes, unique personalities, and the ability to tell stories. Recommendations encompass participatory design methodologies, cultural integration frameworks, and ongoing digital engagement initiatives. Subsequent research ought to investigate longitudinal studies, regional comparisons, and quantitative impact evaluations concerning brand equity.*

Keywords: *mascot; university branding; visual identity; semiotics; social media engagement; Generation Z*

Introduction

In the current period of brand rivalry, the quality of product or service or campus experience is only one aspect of the competing in the marketplace. The same is true for competition among universities which depends on scholarship as well as a certain representation and public image. Among the components of digital marketing on social media, one is visual identity which is significant because they not only recognize the institution's strengths with emotion but also encour-

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[1]*Viny Fitria is a student at Universitas Ciputra.*

[2]*Marina Wardaya is a lecturer at Universitas Ciputra.*

e-mail: vfitria01@student.ciputra.ac.id

e-mail: marina.wardaya@ciputra.ac.id

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Marina Wardaya[2]

age students and collect stakeholders in community cohesion (Perera et al., 2023). Visual identity also distinguishes an institution from its competing institutions.

A visual identity that is becoming more well-known today for its efficiency in marketing and developing an image in the public mind is a mascot. Organizations use mascots to allow an audience or a broader public to communicate the image of an organization to society in a simple and effective way (Rahmadini, 2023). A mascot is a brand representation in a character with qualities and characteristics of the brand (Synakarya & Arifianto, 2024) The mascot represents an opportunity for the university to build a relationship with the audience, especially the audience of younger generations that are more attracted to visual content that is more interactive and entertaining. Therefore, a mascot serves the role of a brand ambassador, safer and more manageable than using celebrities or recognized personalities, because a producer can exercise full control over the actions of a fictional character without losing brand value (Veda Varsha Reddy B & Sathish A.S, 2023).

The use of mascots is also common among universities in Indonesia, especially in the wake of COVID-19, which accelerated digitalization. For instance, Malang State University introduced Cakrawala on October 17, 2019, after a 2019 design competition open to Malang State University students. Pradita University instituted a mascot to reinforce its identity as a new institution, with the mascot being created in August 2017 (Tjhie et al., 2023). These are indicative of mascots now being strategic devices in university branding and having surpassed adjunct roles in relation to university branding in the digital age.

University mascots do not always receive favorable reactions and responses from their audiences. Having a mascot on social media is a valuable way to help in-troduce a university's existence to the audience (brand awareness), however, the social media content and interaction with the audience ultimately have a broader impact on how a university is perceived. A well-thought-out mascot should also account for the target audience demographics, size of the institution, and consistency with brand guidelines in order to be memorable (Fathoni, 2023). Factors that affect a mascot's ability to be a representation of a university include visual quality, connection with the university's values, and activation on social media. This presents the question: what makes a university mascot effective and acceptable?

Furthermore, this study used Barthes' semiotics analysis to learn about the university mascot as a way to communicate institutional mission, institutional and ideological narrative through visuals. This research investigates the visual characteristics and philosophy of college mascots while also gauging the effectiveness of how the mascot is accepted by the audience on social media, specifically Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. The analysis employs semiotic and visual perception methodologies to investigate the visual significations inherent in the mascot's design, alongside audience reactions and the implications regarding the mascot's form and persona. Graphic design is an important part of creating mascots that are both visually appealing and deeply meaningful to colleges. This approach can enhance historical comprehension of the role of mascots in shaping university identity in the contemporary digital era.

Methodology

The researchers in this study utilized a descriptive-comparative qualitative approach to investigate the university mascots' role as a visual and ideological symbol of institutional identity for higher education institutions. The subjects

of this study were four mascots of selected universities in Indonesia, which are YUCCA (Ciputra University Surabaya), ROGA (Bandung Institute of Technology), BRONE (Brawijaya University), and CAKRA (Malang State University)).

Data was collected through three main sources: official social media content during 2025 period, institutional documents from official website and audiences feedback (posts like tweets and comments). This data analysis used semiotic framework that established by Roland Barthes (Chandler, 2022), and was organized around three levels of meaning, denotation (the visual aspects that are explicit, shape, color, gestures and symbols), connotation (symbolic associations connected to values, courage, innovation or excellence) and myth (ideological portrayals of institutional identity, positioning them as superior and competing entities). Semiotics used to interpret visual meaning from university mascot.

Outside visual approach research also collects data through journal studies and surveys as a quantitative approach via Google Form (Mulisa, 2022). This data used as validation of the semiotic approach and enhance the legitimacy of results. Triangulation helped explore the analysis of both institutional intent and audience meaning-making. The survey, a total of 50 respondents, was shared openly with the general public, primarily in East Java (Surabaya).

By employing both comparative visual analysis and audience interpretation, it anchored triangulation between the institutional intention, visual form, and public perception. In a similar vein to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), the mascots were examined as living media of communication, acting as socio-cultural texts in relation to the power relations and collective identity they constructed. This methodological structure brought together visual description, cultural interpretation and ideological critique, in order to uncover how university mascots function as semiotic agents constructing and communicating institutional myths.

Result

According to data collecting results, 86.5% of respondents (Average rate scores 4 - 5) report being very familiar with mascots that are primarily viewed on platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook) when asked to recount their experience with mascots, followed by product packaging and television advertising. The most salient aspects of design written by respondents are shape/figure and the style of illustration. Overall, visual preference especially the simplicity of form and consistency of style are important considerations when determining intended audiences will accept mascots, including youth.

Cheerful, consistent visual style mascots with clear stories rated highest for memorability (4.3), clear messaging (4.18), and storytelling effectiveness (4.42). Respondents especially favored them for being cute, simple, and linked to personality, mascots did not have much of a direct impact on their purchase decision, however, with an average score of 3.82, confirming their primary purpose is brand awareness and emotional connection rather than purchasing.

Table 1. Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Philosophical/Ideological Values	Percentage
14-17 years	8	16 %
18-22 years	28	56 %
23-27 years	12	24 %
28-32 years	2	4 %
Total	50	100 %

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Marina Wardaya[2]

A. YUCCA (UC):

Entrepreneurial spirit, innovation.

Figure 1. Official YUCCA Design
(Source: Personal research documentation)

- Character: An animalistic character as a unicorn. YUCCA name is acronym for Ciputra University for Entrepreneurship. The word Yucca is derived from the Yucca plant, and in Native American culture symbolizes strength, tenacity and the cycle of life. Fundamental characteristics of the entrepreneurial experience.

- The color orange is dominant, as it symbolizes creativity, innovation, entrepreneurial energy, a positive attitude about challenges, courage to take risks, and a character that values action in executing business.

- Expression/ gesture: energetic, innocent, enthusiastic. Depicts a youthful entrepreneur who embodies optimism, is not deterred by failure, and is always ready to learn.

- Symbol: Unicorn - dreams and hopes, Horn - unique and distinct in business, Yucca. Plant - *strength, resilience, sustainable growth.*
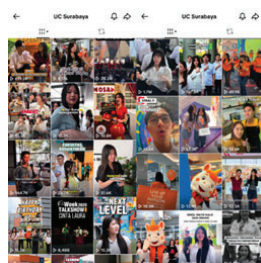

Figure 2. TikTok @uc_yucca , accessed October 4, 2025
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Types of content highest views on Tik-Tok is content that collaborates with or involves influencers, while content about yucca is not as popular. The highest so far for Yucca content is 13,9 k view.
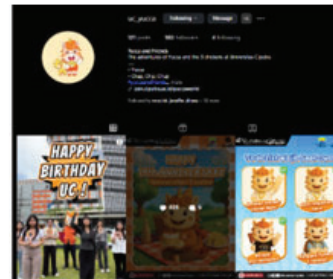

Figure 3. Instagram uc_yucca, accessed October 4, 2025
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Yucca has its own Instagram account, the highest engagement so far only reached bellow 50k views unlike the UC reels that reached more than 2 M views.

The audience's reception of the YUCCA mascot illustrates the intricate interplay between popular aesthetic values and institutional expectations of academic image. At the semiotic denotation level, YUCCA is represented by a young entrepreneur who is imaginative and willing to dream. At the semiotic connotation level, the unicorn signally represents a marker of uniqueness and differentiation among other businesses, while the philosophy of the yucca plant substantiates the narratives of resilience and sustainable growth as entrepreneurial values.

Positively speaking, junior respondents viewed the concept of unicorn as very relevant to Generation Z attributes and contemporary visual trends like Pop Mart, Labubu, and East Asian "cute culture" (Bîrlea, 2023). This concept uses an optimistic, aspirational aesthetic capable of generating high engagement on social media, where the advantage of using visuals is very significant for digital communication (Karadağ et al., 2024). In

contrast, some respondents questioned the appropriateness of the unicorn symbol concretely in the Indonesian cultural expression. As a mythological creature from West, the unicorn is assumed to have little connectedness with the local identity (Perera et al., 2023). Additionally, the fantastical visual character seemed to these respondents too light to represent the realities of entrepreneurship in their challenge and risk-taking capacity and might create an impression of fanaticism of pop culture rather than valid representation of the University as an identity.
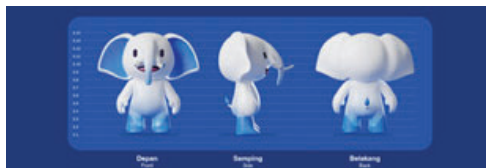
B. ROGA (ITB):

Teknologi, kreativitas sains.

Figure 4. Works - "ROGA" Institut Teknologi
(Source: Personal research documentation)

- Character: The character depicts an elephant hybrid of Ganesh, with the frame of a robot in gear including an ITB alma mater jacket. "Robot Elephant" and its character symbolizes a merging of tradition and the future.

- Dominant colors: White and blue: white depicts the purity of academic vocation, the morality of innovation, blue depicts intellect, technology, and institutional legitimacy.

- Expression/gesture: warm, confident, and approachable.

- Symbol: Broken tusk - wisdom and courage to achieve the impossible, Robotic elements - transformation, advancement, and technologic advancement, Alma mater jacket, identity and belonging, Ganesha elephant and technology - fusing tra-

dition and future.

Figure 5. ITB Instagram, @itb1920 accessed October 4, 2025
(Source: Personal research documentation)

The content of ITB's official Instagram account shows that the most popular content with more than 3M views is the one featuring professors or lecturers.
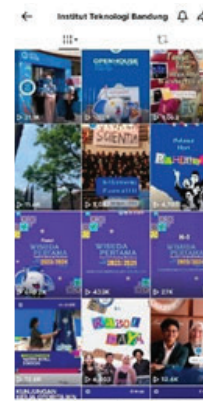

Figure 6. official ITB TikTok account, accessed October 4, 2025
(Source: Personal research documentation)

However, the TikTok account doesn't featuring much content with Roga on it. While on twitter we can see some students' enthusiasm.

ROGA is an object that forges an emotional connection between ITB students and the wider community through its apparent aesthetic appeal and philosophy. It is evidenced by several popular tweets

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on social media that highlight the palpable enthusiasm for ROGA's presence: users express that ROGA "is bringing the spirit of the campus to the digital space" and upload pictures of campus activities featuring ROGA as the focus. When ROGA is present at campus and regional events, it is often visually branded, from exhibition stands and new student orientation booths to photos or promotional materials for student activities, so that ROGA becomes immersed in campus life. ROGA is not simply an object, but also an increasingly available entity that is instrumental to a collective identity and provides emotional interaction between members of the campus community through social media postings and actual activities within the life of the campus.

So far, there has been no concrete data regarding criticism of Roga, but potential criticism may arise from the robotic aspect of Roga. The design of Roga does not fully represent the elephant Ganesha in the ITB logo and represents technology more than ITB's values and history (Permana, 2023).

C. BRONE (UB):

Courage, youthful energy.

Figure 7. Official website of Brawijaya University
(Source: Personal research documentation)

● Character: A small robot dressed in university formal wear with a graduation hat, designed as an information-providing companion robot capable of learning and developing, with a robot form to represent innovativeness, and a sturdy appearance representing the institution's competitiveness.

● Dominant colors: Gray/silver, blue, yellow and black. Silver represents modernization, blue represents trust, yellow represents happiness, and black gives a touch of elegance (Brawijaya University, n.d)

● Expression/ gesture: Cordial and supportive, demonstrating the role as a peer who is available to assist the educational community with affable gestures, even though it is through the automated responses of technology.

● Symbols: Robot shape - novelty, power, and competitiveness of the institution, Toga cap - representation of graduation and scholarly success, Formal alma mater dresses -ensuring institutional identity and professionalism.
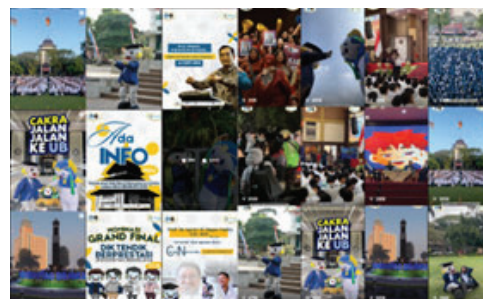

Figure 8. Official Instagram account of Brawijaya University, accessed on October 4, 2025
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Likes and views from Brawijaya University's official account surprisingly reached its peak when they do collab with Malang State University. It reached more than 1 M views on their TikTok.
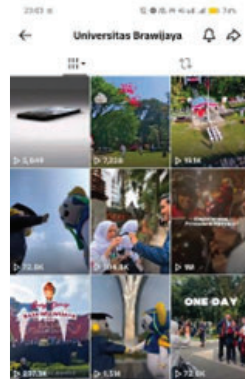
Figure 9. TikTok Resmi Universitas Brawijaya, accessed on October 4, 2025
(Source: Personal research documentation)

A companion robot links well to your digitization of learning, the name is catchy and self-explanatory in its acronym, the silver-blue color scheme conveys a sense of technology and trust, the toga and alma mater characteristics give it an academic identity, and philosophy of "learning and growing" fits uniquely as a reflection on the student experience.

In contrast, according to the findings of Rahmadini (2023), BRONE has only a minor presence on social media, a tiny representation on the online learning site, and in a few Instagram highlights. BRONE does not engage with the students, through interactive content and its minimal robot representation may not have a meaningful distinction compared to other university's robot mascots. It runs the risk of coming off as "stiff" or lacking emotion to engage with the students on a personal level. A limited brand activation allows for BRONE to take on the role of an alternative logo rather than a character that is "alive" and relatable.

D. CAKRA (UM):

Educational identity, fighting spirit.

Figure 10. Official Website UM
(Source: Personal research documentation)

- Character: A human-shaped figure wearing a Malang State University jacket and a Malangan mask on its head. This character represents a fusion of academic spirituality and pride in Malang's local culture.

- Dominant colors: The combination of blue, golden yellow, and green represents the intellect, enthusiasm, and hope of the community. This color combination creates an attractive visual impression of harmony and warmth, while also representing the characteristics of the university.

- Expression/gesture: friendly, wide smile, and hand gestures with an open gesture that portray a welcoming attitude. This is a depiction of the friendly, inclusive, and positive character of the university in continuing Malang tradition.

As the mascot of Malang State University, Cakra is represented as a humanoid figure in an alma mater jacket with a Malangan mask. There is a blend of man and academic attributes with local wisdom in Cakra's aesthetics. The color choices of Cakra prompt positive emotional and associative ties of warmth, enthusiasm, and new friendships, correlating with

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the university's branding in response to multicultural awareness and engagement fostering an inclusive and youthful image of UM. The welcoming openness shown through body language, along with an inviting, wide smile, expresses the spirit of welcoming collaboration expected from UM's academic community.

Semiotically, the visual denotation of Cakra represents the ideal student as someone intelligent, resilient, and rooted in local culture. At the connotative level, the representation of Malangan masks, which are culturally significant to Malang, establishes a marker of regional identity and pride, and relates back to the university as a key component of Malang's cultural narrative. Furthermore, while this narrative and imagery denotes a regional identity and pride, it also denotes the institution negotiating between local values and a contemporary, competitive global branding of the university in the mythological or ideological sense.

Audiences' Feedback

On the positive side, the public considers Cakra to be visually appealing, a philosophy that represents the character of UM, and the ability to build emotional connections with students. Cakrawala serves as a successful case to utilize a university mascot as a relevant metric for other universities, based on the analysis of literature and social media observations from 2024-2025. The absence of negative findings indicates that the participatory approach was highly effective in the design of the mascot (Unit Hubungan Masyarakat, 2019).

Discussion

The comparative analysis of four university mascots representing institutions in Indonesia will be elaborated upon,

making the connections among visual form, institutional philosophical values, and audience response. This has the goal of understanding how each mascot creates academic identity through aesthetic strategies, color choice, and cultural representations the forms of cultural symbols displayed.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of College Mascots

University	Philosophical/Ideological Values	Visual Representation & Color	Connotative Meaning	Positive Response	Negative Response
UC - YUCCA	Entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, courage to take risks	Energetic, expressive orange unicorn with horns	Creative imagination and business drive	Appealing to Gen Z, imaginative, relevant to digital culture	Too Western, risks being seen as a gimmick
ITB - ROGA	Integration of tradition and modern technology	Ganesha-robot in blue and white	Synthesis of scientific tradition and digital progress	A strong symbol, prominent campus identity	Too cartoonish, considered frivolous for academic purposes
UB - BRONE	Innovation, strength, coherence, and global competitiveness	Companion robot with a graduation cap, blue, silver, and black colors	Technology, continuous learning, and institutional adaptability	Relevant to the digitization of education, memorable name	Robot designs with university insignia are already widespread
UM - CAKRA	Education, openness, collaboration	Cheerful humanoid with Malangan ornaments	Representation of modern educators rooted in culture	Inclusive, easily accepted by the public	Difficult for audiences outside Java to understand

In summary, the four mascots are generally driven to convey institutional values through a popular-style visual display, which indicates a transition to animated characters instead of fixed symbols. The cross-settings literature findings suggest that most mascots are of small size and are humanoid, animal, or robot in their structure without being whole human figures (Nicolay & Wardaya, 2021).

Most universities highlight aspects of local culture, technology, or campus features in their mascot: ROGA converts ITB's Ganesha into a robotic character suggesting innovative spirit and technology, CAKRA uses the Malangan mask, combined with the UM alma mater, as a public license to advocate local character and educational values, BRONE is a robot character wearing a toga hat and an alma mater dress which foregrounds the educational identity and class, and finally YUCCA features a unicorn symbol from the West that resonates with the aesthetics of Gen Z as well as the philosophy of the yucca plant.

Table 3. Barthes's Semiotic Analytic Result

Barthes's Semiotic	Findings from the Survey	Meaning / Implication
Denotation	Audiences value simple shapes, consistent and cute character designs as the most important visual elements.	Audience prefer easy to recognize visual.
Connotation	Mascot with strong personality and storytelling are feel more at is for audience.	Visual not the only thing that can attract audience. Background stories also strengthen mascot engagement.
Myth	Story help mascot become living and embodied as brand myth.	Mascot became not just as an symbol but also a more approachable part of brand.

Visual analysis used a semiotic approach to highlight how all mascots connect with the audience through a visual approach. At the denotative level, respondents clearly prefer mascots with simple, consistent, and cute visual forms because they are easy to recognize. At the connotative level, audiences give more responses when mascots express personality and storytelling, indicating that visual appearance alone is not enough and that narrative story gives a more natural connection to the respondent. At the myth level, strong stories enable mascots to function as living symbols of the brand, transforming them from mere illustrations into approachable characters that embody institutional identity.

The more cartoonish a given element, the more likely there could be a perception of a "gimmick," but also the greater the effectiveness of creating mental emotional closeness with students and the public who experienced work within the digital genre. This confirms the dialectic between academic institutional branding and popular visual culture in contemporary university identity communication.

Key Findings:

- Visual Elements: Small humanoid characters with welcoming gestures as a method of establishing emotional closeness.

- Identity Integration: The blend of local culture (Ganesha, Malangan masks) or tech (robots) with institutional attributes (alma mater, gowns). The cross-settings literature findings also support this result, that cultural and personal item make the biggest attraction in design (Wijaya et al., 2025).

- Trade-off: Aesthetic vs. Credibility: Cartoon mascots work well in a digital setting, but they can detract from the academic reputation, mascots with limited activation will not foster relationships even with coherent designs.

- Important Elements in Effectiveness: visual appeal, appropriate philosophy, CAKRA and ROGA activation strategies provide the best balance of these three aspects.

Conclusion

This study uses Roland Barthes's semiotic approach to analyze four university mascots in Indonesia, and finds that mascots, in general, have shifted from being static symbols to becoming active narrative characters, which are mechanisms for the communication of universi-

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ty identity. Effective mascots include three essential elements: (1) unique, optimistic and affable visual characteristics, (2) a philosophy consistent with institutional values, and (3) an activation strategy on social media that is consistent.

There is juxtaposition of serious academic requirements and popular aesthetics. The mascots that embrace the local culture, CAKRA, and ROGA carry a deep sense of authenticity while YUCCA appears to be able to woo a digital audience that can result in some potentially justified criticism of its validity to the local culture. Another significant finding shows that visual design does not have strong effects on its own. Through collaborative design in managing social media content, audience engagement can be increased. For example, CAKRA is now a social media mascot for the DKV students to collectively design content. ROGA is also hoping to engage an audience through active pages on several different channels. There is also CAKRA (UM) who collaborates with their digital design team, BRONE (UB).

This research indicates support for the idea that mascots are more than visual decoration, but are semiotic agents that create and convey institutional myth, particularly with regard to the digitization of higher education after COVID-19. The efficacy of mascots resides in their potential to connect serious academic values with popular visual language that is salient with Generation Z.

The implications of these findings are such that recommendations arise for both institutional and future research. Educational Institutions should engage their students and staffs in the design process of the mascot and competition models such as CAKRA have demonstrated their effectiveness at establishing community ownership and acceptance of campus. The integration of local cultural artefacts will add to the authenticity of the mascot while also being aesthetically contemporary to real youth audiences. Moreover, with mascots having social media engagement, it will need consistent activation of sufficient content as mascots towards public engagement will otherwise just be alternative logos and not living communication agent or tool.

In future studies, several directions should be taken to advance awareness of mascots' role in branding institutions of higher education. Longitudinal studies focused on mascots would address how their perceived effectiveness might evolve over a long period. Comparison would also provide better framing of national mascots outside Java, that might present cultural differences in mascot design strategies. Future work utilizing quantitative studies focused on institutions of pledge and brand equity in promotional leads and student recruitment would further propagate work on mascots as branding and identity.

In understanding a context to the study findings of this study in the wider debate on mascots, it is necessary to address the limitations. This research was bounded by a study of 4 mascots through a qualitative study, and semiotic as the primary analytical framework. Data from engagements on social media were often observational and did not have measure variables or comprehensive quantitative metrics around rounded measures, conversion rate, or sentiment scores. As it stands, study findings present potential perceived effectiveness of mascots, as considered by respondents' point of view. Validation is an important next step for findings where data analytics based studies and further broader survey methods with study samples capturing more respondent participants responsibly, can further flow consider generalizability and robustness.

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Marina Wardaya[2]

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