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The Effect of Brand Mascots on Consumers' Purchasing Behaviors

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Abstract**—**Brand mascots are the cartoon characters, which are mainly designed for advertising or other related marketing purposes. Many brand mascots are extremely popular, since they were presented in commercial advertisements and Line Stickers. Brand Line Stickers could lead the users to identify with the brand and brand mascots, where might influence users to become loyal customers, and share the identity with the brand. The objective of the current study is to examine the effect of brand mascots on consumers' decision and consumers' intention to purchase the product. This study involved 400 participants, using cluster sampling from 50 districts in Bangkok metropolitan area. The descriptive analysis shows that using brand mascot causes consumers' positive attitude toward the products, and also heightens the possibility to purchasing the products. The current study suggests the new type of marketing strategy, which is brand fandom. This study has also contributed the knowledge to the area of integrated marketing communication and identification theory.

Keyword**—**Brand mascot, consumers' behavior, marketing communication, purchasing.

I. Introduction

IN the area of integrated marketing communication, communicators need to understand the strategies of using the available resources to communicate to the target consumers. Integrated marketing communication is not only to spread the campaign in all available media, but it is how to use these available media to reach the business goal or the goal of a particular campaign. Nowadays, social network is an important medium that most organizations need to adapt their marketing strategies to fit into its platform. Past studies in the area of social network have compared the function of social network to other traditional media or even to web 1.0 elements [1], [24]. Social network is a powerful tool for the organization to reach the target consumers, to get a direct interaction with their stakeholders [1], and also to quickly solve the crisis [2]. Line is another social networking application where many organizations in Thailand have used it to communicate to their stakeholders. These organizations do not only use Line to connect directly with their customers, but they provide Line Stickers for their customers or other general people to use.

Line Sticker is similar to Facebook Sticker in chat/message mode. Users can post the image of the cartoon characters which are available in sticker set to replace their facial expressions. Stickers help social network users to get closer to the real-world communication where facial expressions are involved. The number of Line Stickers is much larger than the number of Facebook Stickers, since Line application allows individuals to create and sell their own stickers. Many organizations in Thailand created Line Stickers to promote their own organizations and their products. Generally, Line users can download the stickers of some large organizations for free, since these organizations own Line business accounts and has made a prepayment to Line Corporation. These Line Stickers of business organizations have been created based on brand mascots of the products or the companies. As these brand mascots were presented as a part of promotional elements in social network, the objectives of the current study are (1) to examine the effect of brand mascots on consumers' purchasing decisions and (2) to examine the effect of brand mascots on their purchasing behaviors. The possible effectiveness of brand mascots and the consumer identity will be discussed in the following literature review.

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II. Literature Review

A. Brand Mascots

A brand mascot is different from a general mascot, not in term of how it looks, but how it conveys the meaning, message, and value of the related products or the organizations. Because the product cannot speak by itself, the organization needs to look for someone who can speak for it. Brand mascots can work as product endorsers, which are similar to how the organization uses celebrities as the endorsers [3]. Arunrangsiwed [4] have compared the use of celebrities and fictional superheroes as product endorsers. It was that the business has no control over the following behavior of the selected celebrity, but the behavior of superhero is controllable. In other words, using a superhero as the product endorser will not disturb the value of the product, but using the celebrity as the product endorser may cause a negative outcome, if there is negative news caused by that celebrity. Brand mascot could work in the same way as how the superhero does. The company is able to control the image of brand mascot by themselves. And it is even better that the company does not need to pay extra money for using copyright superhero characters.

It might be a belief that celebrities have their own credibility and attractiveness, but brand mascots do not have. However, some brand mascots have become the celebrities for both children and general people. For example, many people know Tony the Tiger, Bertie Bassett, and Bibendum or

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Michelin Man [5]. These brand mascots were also made as meme and manipulation by their fans. This implies that if the company could make the image of their brand mascot strong enough, they would not need to worry about the credibility and attractiveness of their brand mascots.

A number of previous studies have shown that brand mascots have some effect on consumers' behaviors. Kraak and Story [6] found that in the brand mascot condition, the children consumed a larger amount of food larger than in the control condition. In the same study, brand mascots also have an effect on children's choices of products. The researcher of a previous study also explored another area of the brand mascot. A brand mascot, Redskins, brought a negative perception from fans and outsiders to a football team, Washington Redskins. This is because it represents Native American or Red Indian [7]. However, the study of Benson [7] pointed out that some brand mascot has a very important effect on viewers' identity. The use of brand mascots, brand identity, consumer's identity, and also brand mascots in Line application will be discussed in the next part.

B. Brand Identity

The goal of brand mascot is to strengthen the identity of the product [8]. As the product itself, it might not have much difference compared to the product of competitors. Using brand mascots can make the product outstanding from other similar products. Brown and Ponsonby-McCabe [9] stated that brand mascot is the great part of product identity.

To make people to identify with the organization will benefit the organization itself. This is because to identify with something, the individual will feel that he or she is a part of that thing, and also has the loyalty toward that thing, too. The early research in the area of identification and social identity theory found that if the organization successfully persuaded their employees to identify with the organization, the employees would not often try to change their jobs [10]. A social network study also found that if social networking users identified with a particular social network, they would spread the words about that social network [11].

Based on Young [12], two types of identity are “force change identity” and “choosing change identity”. The organization does not force the consumers to use it, but they persuade them to use the product, so if the consumers identify with the organization or its product, this type of identity will be the choosing change identity. This situation is similar to the way fans choose to identify with their favorite celebrities, sport teams, or other entertainment objects [13]. If the same process occurs between the consumers and the organization or its product, the researchers of the current study would name it, "brand fandom" or "product fandom." To consider this situation in other context, Bar-Ilan, Bronstein, and Aharony [14] discussed a new phenomenon, "politic fandom," that the posts about politicians' personal lives are more favorable than the posts about political careers. For example, some Vladimir Putin's fans may prefer to watch the video of Putin's sport activities or being with his pets rather than watching him giving political opinions.

Brand mascots could make the term of brand fandom possible. A person might hesitate to be a fan of the product, but it is easier for them to be a fan of living objects, such the brand mascot. Being a fan of the brand, the organization could gain the benefits from the customers, such as gaining the loyalty from the customers. Moreover, being fans of brand, the consumers do not need to make a reasonable purchasing decision or to compare the product with the competitors'.

Line application allows the organization to involve brand mascots into the personal lives of their consumers. Since the communication in social network has lack of facial expressions [15], the users need to use some available images to help represent their facial expressions. Line Sticker replaces the traditional emoticons with vivid cartoon characters, which the organization could design them based on their brand mascot. The way people use these Line Stickers replacing their own facial expressions is how they unconsciously identify with the brand. If the users repetitively post Line Sticker of an organization, they might feel that they are a part of the organization or its product.

By considering a cosplay event where fans dress as their favorite cartoon characters, fans firstly like the cartoon characters, and then they identify with those cartoon characters by dressing like them [16]. To promote the organization through Line Sticker is a reverse process compared to the cosplay acts. Line users will firstly identify with brands or brand mascots by using its stickers, and it is possible that the users would become fans of the organization and finally purchase its products.

C. Marketing Aspect

Wongmonta [17] recommended the strategies of using the integrated marketing communication, which are to attract new customers and to hold current customers. Line Stickers can function in both strategies. Line Stickers can attract the new customers as mentioned under the topic of brand identity. Line Stickers can also hold the current customers by working as the stimuli or a reminder [17]. Since many people use social network as a part of their routine, by using Line application, they will see brand Line Stickers for several times. This could help reminding the customers to purchase the product, and maintaining a good relationship between the organization and its customers.

Because integrated marketing communication requires an ability of the communicators to use various media for supporting the marketing campaigns to reach the goal of the organization, brand mobile application is a powerful tool for them to use. Brand mobile application can be processed as social media, online market place, games, and database of company's products [18].

Unsurprisingly, brand mascots can present as a part of brand mobile application, where strengthen the identity of brand mobile application and help remind the prior relationship between customers and the organizations.

Although the effect of brand mascots on consumer's behaviors has been explored in previous studies, none of them examines the effect of brand mascots, that can be identified

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with the consumers through mobile application. Moreover, none of the studies in this area have been done in Thailand, and there are also lack of studies done with Line application compared to other social network such as Facebook and Twitter. Brand or product is no longer just what people buy and consume, but in the context like Thailand, brand mascots and Line Stickers have become a great part of consumers' lives. The shifting from general brand mascots to be brand Line Stickers was the gap that should be filled. The current study would help contribute to the identification theory, the integrated marketing communication, and the area of brand mascots itself.

III. Method

The researchers used the cluster sampling to select 400 participants in Bangkok metropolitan area. Fifty districts of Bangkok were listed, and eight people from each district would fill in the questionnaire.

After the participants filled in their demographic data, they would reply two sets of questions about brand mascots and their purchasing behaviors. These two measures were written for using in the current study. All items were tested with 30 representative samples to see if these samples could understand the meaning of all items. The first measure was to indicate consumer's decision making on purchasing a product after they were reminded by the images of brand mascots. The example of the items is "After I look at this brand mascot, I would search for the products," and "After I look at this brand mascot, I would like to buy this product rather than other similar products." The second measure was to indicate consumer's intention to purchase a product after they were reminded by images of brand mascots. The example of the items is "After I look at this brand mascot, I certainly need to purchase this product," and "After I look at this brand mascot, the number of products that I want to buy is greater than usual." There were three brand mascots used as the reminders in this study. Each brand mascot was presented on the top part of the questionnaire. This means the participants would see the brand mascots before filling in the answer about their purchasing behaviors. These three brand mascots were Oon-Jai (AIS, Advanced Info Service), Colonel Sanders (KFC), and Godji (PTT, Public Company Limited). Descriptive analysis was used to calculate all results.

IV. Results

Educational level of most participants was graduate level or higher. Most of them work at private companies, and average income was 23,960 baht or around 730 USD per month. Comparing this to Per capita GDP of Thailand in 2015, participants in the current study had a higher income than general people in Thailand (GPP in 2015 was around 15,750 baht per month). This might be because the selected samples live or work in Bangkok, which is the capital of Thailand.

The results from the first measure indicated that most participants agreed that brand mascots could motivate them to make the decision to purchase the products. The results from the second measure indicated that brand mascots have a great influence on participants' intention to purchase the products.

TABLE I
Demographic Data

Variables	items	N	%
Age	20-25	89	22.25
	26-30	107	26.75
	31-35	52	13.00
Education	High school	68	17.00
	High vocational	69	17.25
	Graduate level or higher	158	39.50
Occupation	Employee in a private company	178	44.50
	Entrepreneur	59	14.75
	Housekeeper	57	14.25
Income	10,000-20,000 baht	68	17.00
	20,001-30,000 baht	225	56.25
	30,001-40,000 baht	34	8.50

TABLE II
Decision and Intention to Purchase the Products after Viewing Brand Mascots

Variables	items	N	%
Decision Making	1. Using brand mascots as stimuli.	198	49.50
	2. Brand mascots heighten the need to search for the products.	186	46.50
	3. Brand mascots influence on a shopping plan.	182	45.50
	4. Brand mascots influence on a purchasing decision.	232	58.00
	5. Positive feeling after own the product with brand mascots	249	62.25
Intention to Purchase the Product	1. Influence on purchasing the particular type of product	229	57.25
	2. Influence on purchasing the particular brand	235	58.75
	3. Influence on purchasing the product of the particular organization.	178	44.50
	4. Influence on purchasing the product immediately	183	45.75
	5. Influence on purchasing a great amount of product	189	47.25

V. Discussion

Since the use of brand mascots is positively related to consumer's decision and intention to purchase the products, the organizations should consider including brand mascots in their marketing strategies. The current study examined only the effect from brand mascots which were made as Line Stickers. To be able to understand the difference between (1) general brand mascots and (2) the brand mascots which were made as Line Stickers, the future studies should involve both types of brand mascots.

It is the fact that people spend a great amount of time online, especially in chatting or texting activities. Brand Line Stickers have become an additional part of social capital that users use them to communicate with others. Line Stickers narrow the gap between real-life communication and online communication by providing facial expressions for their users to post. By using these brand Line Stickers, the users unconsciously identify with brand mascots. And undoubtedly, this type of brand mascots or brand Line Stickers can influence consumer's purchasing behaviors.

In Aristotelian Language of Persuasion, the three rhetorical elements are ethos, pathos, and logos. Brand Line Stickers

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work as both ethos (credibility) and pathos (emotion). Many cartoon characters and famous brand mascots have become celebrities [19], so these brand mascots would have their own credibility as well as the actual celebrities do. Brand Line Stickers could also be able to attract consumer's emotions, since all of them have facial expressions. Line users use these brand Line Stickers' facial expressions as representative of their own emotions during chatting.

To create Line Stickers based on brand mascots is one of marketing strategies of using brand mascots. There might be a lot more strategies of using brand mascots that are waiting the researchers to explore. The researchers of current study suggested that the research studies in this area should not limit only in the field of marketing. We encourage the scholars to investigate more on other dimensions of brand mascots, such as gender bias appeared in brand Line Stickers, and also the relationships between their facial expressions and general personal traits of individuals in the country of head office. Similarly for the area of social network studies, we encourage the scholars to explore more about users' time spending in Line application and other related behaviors, which have been explored in other social networks, such as cyberbullying [20], narcissism [21], addiction, anonymity, and presentation of self [22], [23].

The limitation of this study is how the questionnaire presented the images of only three brand mascots. The researchers of further study should involve multiple brand mascots to increasing the levels of generalization. Moreover, the selected brand mascots should come from various types of organization. In other words, the researchers should not just select the brand mascots from the food-production companies, but they should include various kinds of companies in the study. This suggestion will help the communicators to be able to apply the results of further research in their real marketing practices.

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