MASCOTS AS SEMIOTIC COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM PROMOTION: A CASE OF THAILAND

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to examine semiotic communication through mascot aimed at promoting Thailand’s tourism based on the theory of semiotics and the concept of mascots. Qualitative research was adopted with content analysis. The population was 20 mascots that had been constructed to promote tourism in Thailand.

The findings could be divided into two respects of semiotics: the signifier and the signified. With respect to the signifier, it was found that there were five characteristics of mascots: appearance, dress code, personality, referent/object, and others. For appearance, there were 13 mascots that used animals to promote tourism in Thailand. Moreover, the dress code was another characteristic that had been found in those mascots. Such dress code included ethnic wear, combat uniform, and Thai loincloth (Pha-Khao-Ma in Thai). The third characteristic of mascots was personality; it was found that most mascots were cheerful, friendly, and lovely. For the characteristic of referent/object, the concept of local animals was mainly applied. For other characteristics, it was found that most of the mascots came in a single form rather than in a couple of forms. In terms of the signified, both denotative and connotative were found in those mascots. The first one was analyzed by comparing appearances and physical characteristics that the mascots were conveying the messages while the latter required that the receivers interpreted the messages from their experiences.

Keywords: Mascots, Semiotics, Communication, Tourism Promotion, Thailand
Introduction

The mascot is a kind of symbol that has been used as a marketing tool to represent a product. The creative design of mascots is derived from living and non-living things, for example, humans, animals, and objects. It is expected to attract the attention of the target market, as the mascots are understandable formally and informally.

With respect to tourism promotion, it is found that there are several Asian countries that utilize mascots. For example, Indonesia has 3 mascots, namely, Para, Pongo, and Rhino. These three mascots are used to promote the tourism campaign, “Wonderful Indonesia” (Marwati, 2019). Taiwan also has its own mascot for tourism promotion. Its mascot is known as Bravo Bear (travel.taipei, 2016). The most popular mascot for tourism promotion is Kumamon of Japan (Anitime, 2015). In Thailand, the mascot is, in addition, adopted to promote its tourism. At the national level, there is one mascot for tourism promotion, Mascot Nong Sukjai. At the provincial level, 20 mascots are found to promote local tourism.

Good design, appearance, and background help strengthen the mascots. Using mascots as a symbol of tourism is a communication process that stimulates the attention of tourists. It also creates recognition and awareness toward the tourist attractions, nature, history, arts, and culture. Moreover, it plays an important role in creating value-added to a product or a service, constructing entertainment and impression among visitors. Mascots help build a positive attitude toward a city or a province for the sustainability of future tourism.

This research was aimed at examining semiotic communication through mascots for Thailand’s tourism promotion based on the concept of semiotics. The conceptual framework relative to this research was written as the following.

Semiotics

Semiotics was derived from a Greek word, Semeion or sign. It was the study of sign and symbol that had been produced and sent or transmitted to indicate how the meaning of representation was formed, including its understanding of a thing or a process of giving such meaning. Semiotics was related to the visual image and visual communication of self-connection. It extended the cultural and social dimensions. Semiology was a tool that could make individuals understand the formation of meaning and its applications. The results of its application could be found in different forms of symbols and signs that illustrated the relationship among things in a causal manner (Weraporn, 2017).

Ferdinand De Saussure, the Swiss linguist, introduced semiology grounded on the theory of structuralism which focused on understanding the structure of meaning. Such an understanding was developed based on the concept of linguistics. Saussure described that all meanings consisted of signifier and signified, adding that a symbol was part of communicating the meaning or transmitting the information by the sender to the receivers. A symbol was used to represent the meaning of a thing. In other words, symbols referred to objects, alphabets, shapes, or colors that were used to communicate the meaning or the concept explaining the idea so that human beings in the same and different cultures could understand it with the same respect (Peerapol, 2015).
Charles Sander Pierce, an American philosopher, further developed the concept initiated by Saussure, based on the theory of humanism. The concept was intended to explain the meaning of visual images and signs. Pierce proposed three approaches to the classification of signs: icon, index, and symbol.

Pierce divided signs into three categories based on the relationship between representation and the original. Those categories were an icon, index/indices, and symbol. The icon was a sign that resembled the real thing or almost exactly. It was understandable, for instance, photos, maps, drawings, pictures on traffic boards, or words imitating the sound of nature. Meanwhile, index/indices were a sign of casual connection. It was an indicator of a thing, for example, smoke, an indicator of fire. On the contrary, the symbol was a sign that demonstrated a thing that was not the same as that of a causal connection. It showed a natural connection that was the result of social convention and learning, such as languages, traffic signs, and mathematical symbols (Sorani, 2001).

**Definition and significance of mascots**

Mascots were cartoon characters with creative designs imitating living and non-living things such as humans, animals, and objects. Typically, they were originated from animals or human characters. Those mascots would be used to present or represent an organization, a brand, a business, an agency, or an institution. Schools, universities, and sports were included. Additionally, a government agency was allowed to publicize the mascots.

Mascots were used to represent a product or service to attract the attention of consumers. The advertising industry and product manufacturers increased their use of cartoon mascots. Different forms of mascot could be seen in the trade shows to make consumers recognize the products quickly. Also, consumers could experience the products through the mascots, which was considered a popular approach. Academic people in the field of marketing saw that mascot could make the products alive, creating a good feeling and intimacy between consumers and those products.

Callcott and Lee (1994) developed a concept that would help differentiate the characteristics of mascots. Such a concept was called AMOP which explained the characteristics of mascots in four dimensions as follows:
1. The appearance was a kind of mascot characteristics that were constructed in the form of humans, animals, cartoon characters, and product personality. The forms of mascots could signify the features of a product. Furthermore, human personality could be subdivided; that is, real human beings were used as mascots. In addition, a human personality that did not exist or that showed only a non-moving picture was used as a mascot. The last mascot characteristic of appearance was the creation of product attributes as a living thing such as Mascot M&M.

2. Media that showed the mascots could be divided based on their categories, for example, newspapers, television, radio, and point of purchase. The mascots could be demonstrated on a wide variety of media. By its nature, the mascot must appear itself on the media to send the message to the receivers or consumers.

3. Origin was defined as a mascot that was created from a famous or infamous actor. If the mascot was originated from a cartoon in a novel, a tv show, or a book whose copyright could be purchased, such mascot (including origins from humans) would be called celebrity characters.

4. The promotion was characterized by active and passive mascots of a product. Active mascots would convince, recommend or demonstrate the product.

Research question

In this research, there was only one research question: how semiotic communication through mascots helps promote Thailand’s tourism.

Research objective

The objective of this research was to analyze semiotic communication through mascots that had been created for Thailand’s tourism promotion.

Expected benefits

1. It was expected that the results would provide knowledge about semiotic communication through mascots aimed at promoting tourism in Thailand.

2. It was expected that the results would be the foundation for further research.

Research method

The qualitative research method was adopted to respond to the research question and objective. The data were analyzed by the technique of content analysis.
Conceptual Framework

1. Population

In this research, 20 mascots that were created to promote tourism in Thailand were the population. Those 20 mascots included Mascot Nong Kod Aun of Chiangrai province (Hug Chiangrai), Mascot Nong Fan of Chiangmai province, Mascot Chang Pu Kam Nga Kheao of Lamphun province, Mascot Nong Mat Chai of Phayao province, Mascot Mhi Kaew of Phetchabun province, Mascot Im Chang of Nakhon Sawan, Kamphangphet, Uthai Thani, and Pichit provinces, Mascot Bak Mi of Bueng Kan province, Mascot Dino of Khon Kaen province, Mascot Khun Thong Boran of Udon Thani province, Mascot Phu Phan and Mascot Phrae Ngam of Kalasin province, Mascot Lum Phu of Nong Bua Lam Phu province, Mascot Leng of Chachoengsao province, Mascot Phi Khun of Nakhon Nayok province, Mascot Tong Tong of Prachinburi province, Mascot Crocko of Samut Prakan province, Mascot Sida of Srakaeo province, Mascot Cho Bot of Lopburi, Mascot Nong Chai Bun of Saraburi province, Mascot Ma Mha Mut of Rayong province, and Mascot Nhu Chuap of Prachuap Khiri Khan province.

Table 1 Twenty mascots for Thailand’s tourism promotion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Mascot</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chiangmai</td>
<td><img src="Image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Nong Fan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chiangrai</td>
<td><img src="Image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Nong Kod Aun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lamphun</td>
<td><img src="Image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Chang Pu Kam Nga Kheao</td>
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![Image](Image1.png)

![Image](Image2.png)

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### Table 1  Twenty mascots for Thailand's tourism promotion (Contd.)

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<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Mascot</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phayao</td>
<td>Phayao</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phetchabun</td>
<td>Mhi Kaew</td>
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<td>Nakhon Sawan, Kamphangphet, Uthai Thani, and Pichit</td>
<td>Im Chang</td>
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<td>Kalasin</td>
<td>Phu Phan and Mascot Phrae Ngam</td>
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<td>Nong Bua Lam Phu</td>
<td>Lum Phu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Udon Thani</td>
<td>Khun Thong Boran</td>
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<td>Bueng Kan</td>
<td>Bak Mi</td>
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<td>Khon Kaen</td>
<td>Dino</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saraburi</td>
<td>Nong Chai Bun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lopburi</td>
<td>Cho Bot</td>
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<td>Samut Prakan</td>
<td>Crocko</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nakhon Nayok</td>
<td>Phi Khun</td>
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<td>Chachengsao</td>
<td>Leng</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prachinburi</td>
<td>Tong Tong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srakaeo</td>
<td>Sida</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ma Mha Mut</td>
<td>Rayong</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nhu Chuap</td>
<td>Prachuap Khiri Khan</td>
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2. **Research instrument:** A coding sheet of semiotic communication through mascot used for Thailand’s tourism promotion was developed based on the theory of semiotics and the concept of mascots. The elements of the coding sheet consisted of provincial mascots with their attached pictures, the signifier (appearance, dress code, personality, referent/object, and others), and the signified (denotative and connotative). Similar characteristics or categories were grouped into the table and the findings were written based on those groupings.

3. **Data collection**

3.1 The results from the analysis would be written on the coding sheet as a method of data collection from 20 mascots that were developed and used to promote tourism in Thailand.

3.2 Analysis and synthesis were performed by means of content analysis.

3.3 The results from analysis and synthesis were presented in a descriptive manner.

**Results**

In this section, the results of the analysis of semiotic communication through mascots for Thailand’s tourism promotion were presented into two aspects: the signifier and signified. It was found from the results that:

1. **The signifier**

The signifier was comprised of five characteristics; appearance, dress code, personality, referent/object and others.

1.1 Appearance: there were five appearances that had been used in designing mascots. Those appearances included animal personification in 13 mascots (Nong Fan of Chiangmai province, Chang Pu Kam Nga Kheao of Lamphun province, Nong Mat Chai of Phayao province, Mhi Kaew of Phetchabun province, Phu Phan and Mascot Phrae Ngam of Kalasin province, Lum Phu of Nong Bua Lam Phu province, Khun Thong Boran of Udon Thani province, Bak Mi of Bueng Kan province,
Dino of Khon Kaen province, Nong Chai Bun of Saraburi province, Crocko of Samut Prakan province, Leng of Chachengsao province, and Sida of Srakaeo province), followed by animated other objects in 3 mascots (Nong Kod Aun of Chiangrai province, Tong Tong of Prachinburi province, and Nhu Chuap of Prachuap Khiri Khan province), animated human in 2 mascots (Phi Khun of Nakhon Nayok province and Ma Mha Mut of Rayong province), product personification in 1 mascot (Im Chang of Nakhon Sawan, Kamphangphet, Uthai Thani, and Pichit provinces), and animals with animal qualities in 1 mascot (Cho Bot of Lopburi province), respectively.

1.2 Dress code: there were three characteristics. Those included clothes, followed by objects and accessories, respectively. Clothes that had been used in designing the mascots were ethnic wear, combat uniform, Thai loincloth, and scarf. The objects used in the dress code included musical instruments, sticky rice basket, seashells, food, glasses, and swords. For accessories, necklace, belt, and glasses were adopted.

1.3 Personality: there were three characteristics of personality in mascots. Those characteristics were facial expression (smile and friendliness), movement (lively and joyful), and the marked body (red cheek, blue eyes, and green ivory), respectively.

1.4 Referent/object: it was found from the analysis that there were 5 referents/objects. Those 5 referents/objects included local animals (dinosaurs, peacocks, Asian black bears, sharks, dogs, teals, cows, monkeys, and crocodile), tourist attractions (mountains, dams, rivers, and national parks), local food and products (food carrier, bamboo shoot, and pineapple), local story/folktale (Chiangmai and Lamphun provinces local stories), and Thai literature (Phra Aphai Mani), respectively.

1.5 Others: it was found from the analysis that there were two characteristics. Those two characteristics came in two forms, which included a single mascot and a couple of mascots. The results showed that 19 mascots were created as a single and there were a couple of mascots.

2) Signified

The signified consisted of two characteristics: denotative and connotative.

2.1 Denotative referred to the understanding of alphabets and appeared things that could be obviously seen as a sign. It was a common understanding among people and generally accepted. Such definition was the first order of signification; that is, it was universal. Based on the analysis of 20 mascots, it was found that there were only 4 of them that could convey the message at this level. Those four mascots were Sida of Srakaeo province (a butterfly that conveyed the meaning of freshness and colors of flowers that it lived in), Nong Chai Bun of Saraburi province (a dairy cattle that conveyed the meaning of cow’s milk and dairy cattle farm), Im Chang of Nakhon Sawan, Kamphangphet, Uthai Thani, and Pichit provinces (conveying the meaning of food and side dish), and Nong Kod Aun of Chiangrai province (communicating the meaning of verdant mountains).

2.2 Connotative was concerned with the formation of subjective meanings that came from an individual’s experiences and feelings. It also covered social values and different cultures. The interpretation of a symbol based on the concept developed by Barthes was connotative at a cultural
level. Based on the analysis of 20 mascots, it was found that the meanings were created by the symbolic system through mascots that could be linked to the identity of a wide variety of toursisms, such as tourist attractions, traditions, eating and living, dressing, and lifestyles.

Discussion

This section presented a discussion about the results written in the previous section.

1. The signifier was the most obvious form of communication. There were 13 mascots that used the signifier, for example, animal personification. Those mascots were developed from local and mythical animals, which was in line with the article written by Noparit Komsan (2018). The article stated that mascots were cartoon characters that were designed and created from living and non-living things, such as animals, humans, and objects. Moreover, it was consistent with the research by Suphatthra Lukrak (2016) that examined the mascot design for publicity on local tourist attractions and products in Thailand. The results indicated that children and adults were interested in the appearance of mascots. What interested them most was animals, followed by objects.

1.2 Dress code: mascots represented local identities through ethnic wear, tribal clothes, and native fabrics.

1.3 Personality: the creators designed the mascots with uniqueness through facial expression and behavior. Such facial expression and behavior included good spirits, friendliness, cheerfulness, and entertainment, which corresponded to the study by Narupon Komsan (2017); Praphaiphan Prueangphong (2014); Thaksina Sukphatthi (2016); Phairot Thiraprapha (2003). An effective mascot that could attract the target market or consumers must possess the characteristics of unique behavior, good spirits, friendliness, and a good mood.

1.4 Referent/object: there were five features found from the results: local animals, local tourist attractions, local food and products, local storytelling/folktale, and Thai literature.

1.5 Others: it was found from the results that there were 19 mascots that came in the form of single while a couple of mascots was found to be only one. This was in line with Narit Pichatphan (2007), stating that most mascots would come in a single. However, the research conducted by Suphatthra Lukrak (2016) collected the data from children in the northeastern region of Thailand and was found that to attract their attention, a couple of mascots must be developed since they would make children not alone and offer the more interesting story.

2) Signified

According to the analysis, the signified was found at denotative and connotative levels through mascots. Consistent with the study by Bamrung Itsarakun (2002), cultural influences affected the design of a symbol, adding that it reflected provincial identity and culture in the area of cultural beliefs, religion, tradition, eating and living, dressing, and lifestyles.

In conclusion, the symbol was characterized by its representation of a message through translation and interpretation. In the context of creating a symbol through a mascot, different forms
were utilized that corresponded to city or provincial identities. It was also consistent with the concept of postmodernism that viewed the meaning and interpretation of symbols as a message that the senders gave out. The extent to which the receivers would understand and interpret the message depended on their accumulated knowledge and experience, including the purposes and interpretations. An image that contained characteristics, shape, colors, and alphabets could be interpreted denotatively and connotatively.

The use of mascots to promote tourism was a transmission process of provincial symbols and identities through non-verbal communication. Those mascots would be presented in such a way that expressed uniqueness to create recognition among general people and tourists. The creators and senders of a message expected their mascot to represent the provincial identity, including the symbol and meaning. Therefore, it was necessary to select a symbol that could convey meaning through a city or provincial mascot. They should understand the use of mascots that corresponded to the purposes to make a symbolic communication effectively and efficiently.

**Conclusion**

Based on the results from the analysis of semiotic communication through mascots for Thailand’s tourism promotion, there were two recommendations as follows:

1. It was recommended that an in-depth interview with the receivers or tourists be conducted. The results of the in-depth interview were expected to show how the receivers and the creators defined the mascots, whether or not those definitions were consistent, and whether the meaning of semiotic communication through mascots was understandable in the same direction. This was to confirm the reliability and validity of the research results.

2. The results from the analysis of semiotic communication through mascots for Thailand’s tourism promotion could be applied to future research in relation to the use of mascots to promote tourism in Thailand. In addition, marketing communicators and related parties could apply the knowledge obtained from this research to make a plan and work plan concerning the use of mascots to promote Thailand’s tourism promotion effectively and efficiently.

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