



“Mascots”: The Pragmatic Agents of Communication

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Abstract

In advertising, mascots are far more than decorative figures; they are powerful instruments of brand identity and emotional connection. The present chapter examines how mascots play a prominent role in communicating effectively between brand captions and the customer perspective. Using insights from communication theory, marketing studies, and semiotics, it examines iconic figures such as the Amul Girl, Tony the Tiger from Kellogg's Frosted Flakes, and the Nirma Girl to highlight their expressive force and cultural reach. The discussion shows how mascots construct narratives that go beyond written slogans, creating associations of trust, familiarity, and persuasion. In doing so, they become more than marketing symbols—they shape consumer memory and embed themselves in the cultural imagination. The discussion shows how mascots weave narratives that go beyond words, inspiring trust, familiarity, and persuasion. By combining visual storytelling with human-like qualities, mascots turn brand communication into memorable experiences that stay with audiences. Ultimately, this chapter argues that mascots serve as a medium between pragmatic agents, and emotion which makes advertising not only persuasive but also long lasting in consumers' memory.

Keywords: Mascots, brand recognition, persuasive communication, consumer mindset, visual narration.

Introduction

Mascots in advertising often speak louder than words. They work as a subtle yet powerful strategy where visuals, symbols, emotions, and messages come together to create the desired impact. More than just playful figures, mascots serve as tools that help brands

stand out, acting not only as emblems but also as trusted messengers between companies and consumers. From the witty Amul girl in India to the familiar Michelin Man, mascots have become part of public memory, shaping how people connect with and remember brands.

This article explores how language, symbols, and culture come together to give mascots their power of persuasion. More than decorative figures, they act as storytellers and companions, building bonds between brands and consumers that feel genuine and enduring. By drawing on human-like traits, cultural symbols, and simple yet powerful narratives, mascots often succeed in engaging people in ways that plain text or traditional advertisements cannot.

The Evolution of Mascots: More Than a Marketing Gimmick

Historically, mascots have roots in heraldry and superstition – used as talismans or tribal symbols (Baker 14). In the 20th century, with the rise of consumer capitalism, they transformed into brand ambassadors. The Pillsbury Doughboy, introduced in 1965, was one of the earliest mascots designed to evoke warmth, family, and wholesomeness (Klein 103). Similarly, Tony the Tiger of Kellogg's Frosted Flakes wasn't just a cartoon; he was a motivational figure appealing to children and parents alike.

What makes mascots compelling is their embodiment of values and projected personality. They communicate tone, ethics, and corporate identity without needing to be overtly verbal. As Roland Barthes notes in his theory of semiotics, "The image is not just a message, it is a system of signs" (Barthes 33). The mascot functions within this system, where every smile, gesture, or costume choice conveys layered meaning.

Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric in Mascots

Effective communication depends on clarity, relatability, and retention. Mascots fulfill these functions primarily through visual rhetoric. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, "images, like language, can articulate meanings as complex as those articulated by words" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2). Mascots, therefore, are multimodal communicators.

Consider the Amul girl—a chubby, blue-haired cartoon character in a polka-dotted frock. She doesn't just promote butter; she comments on political issues, cricket controversies, and cultural trends with satire and wit. Each advertisement is a visual pun, a textual dialogue, and a cultural critique rolled into one. This hybrid form of communication makes Amul ads widely discussed and shared. The mascot here is a rhetorical agent, not merely a visual logo.

Emotional Appeal and the Power of Personification

The use of personification in mascots taps into a deep psychological vein. As social beings, humans are predisposed to respond empathetically to anthropomorphic characters. According to Fournier's study on brand relationships, mascots can "humanize" brands, creating parasocial interactions where consumers feel emotionally bonded with a non-human entity (Fournier 346).

The Pillsbury Doughboy giggles when poked—a minor gesture, yet one that resonates deeply. It suggests innocence, comfort, and reliability. The Michelin Man (Bibendum) has evolved over time to be more relatable and less intimidating, reflecting the brand's adaptive response to consumer sentiment. Through such evolutions, mascots mirror societal change, participating in a feedback loop of consumer-brand interaction.

Cross-Cultural Communication Through Mascots

In multicultural contexts like India, mascots act as cross-linguistic tools. Air India Maharaja, with huge moustache and royal gestures, portray hospitality and exuberance. Though it may now seem outdated with shifting cultural values, his tradition reminds us that mascots once played an important part in bridging language differences through visual appeal.

In the same way, global brand mascots have left a strong imprint on local audiences. Consider McDonald's Ronald McDonald: known everywhere as a clown, his role has been reshaped in different regions to suit local customs and expectations. This flexibility shows how mascots act as cultural interpreters, adjusting a brand's core message to connect with the emotional and cultural rhythms of each community.

Narrative Structure and Brand Mythology

Narratives lie at the core of advertising, with mascots often cast as the heroes of these stories. As Holt points out, "Over time, this story evolves into what scholars term brand mythology" (3). Tony the Tiger is a clear example. He is far more than the mascot of a cereal box—he embodies a larger tale woven around athleticism, confidence, and American family life. His famous catchphrase, "They're grrreat!", is more than a slogan—it is a distinctive signature that reflects both his character and the spirit of the story he represents.

Brand narratives provide consumers with scripts for interaction. They suggest how to feel about a product, what values it aligns with, and how it fits into daily life. In this sense, mascots are narrative anchors. They make stories possible, and stories make communication stick.

Cool by Design: Fido Dido and the 7UP Generation

No conversation about iconic advertising mascots is complete without mentioning Fido Dido, the laid-back, spiky-haired figure who became the face of 7UP in the 1990s. At a time when most mascots were cartoonishly enthusiastic or cheerfully persuasive, Fido was different—he didn't shout slogans or jump around in animated glee. Instead, he lounged in oversized T-shirts, made offbeat observations, and gave off the aura of someone who was effortlessly cool. And that was precisely his charm.

Fido Dido wasn't created to appeal to children, nor did he reflect the traditional domesticity or wholesomeness seen in mascots like the Pillsbury Doughboy. He was tailored for the teenager and young adult audience—those navigating identity, non-conformity, and the desire to be seen as "different." His minimal, hand-drawn look stood in stark contrast to the hyper-polished world of brand mascots, and this simplicity made him stand out. In an era defined by grunge music, denim rebellion, and anti-establishment humor, Fido Dido fit right in.

What made Fido truly effective was that he communicated without trying too hard. His classic line—"Fido is for Fido. Fido is against no one."—wasn't just quirky. It was a statement of nonchalance, of personal ease, of being at peace with oneself in a world full of loud messages. That subtlety was a kind of communication in itself. In fact, as advertising analyst Vishnu Menon observes, "Fido Dido's genius was his refusal to sell. In doing so, he sold the brand better than any hard-sell campaign could" (Menon 78). He didn't pitch 7UP; he was 7UP—fresh, irreverent, and cool without effort.

Interestingly, Fido Dido also enjoyed a strong following in India, where his presence during the early 2000s was synonymous with a rising urban youth culture. At a time when global brands were becoming a part of Indian life, Fido arrived not as a pushy foreigner, but as someone who could sit cross-legged on a college bench and blend in. When the character was revived in later years, the nostalgia was palpable. People remembered Fido not as an ad character, but as an attitude they had once identified with.

Mascots and the Digital Turn

With the digital age came a transformation in how mascots are deployed. Now, they live on Twitter, make reels on Instagram, and star in web series. The Amul girl has transitioned seamlessly into the digital space, her wit now part of meme culture. Her satirical one-liners, such as "Too Uda to

handle,” referencing the Bollywood movie Uda Punjab, show how mascots maintain relevance by tapping into popular culture.

Digital engagement has allowed mascots to develop interactive personas. The Zomato guy with his cheeky push notifications is a mascot-in-spirit—bridging humour and utility. These developments show that mascots no longer remain static symbols. They are active communicators, responding to consumer cues in real time.

Criticism and Ethical Considerations

Despite their appeal, mascots are not free from criticism. Scholars argue that mascots sometimes reinforce stereotypes or distract from corporate accountability. The Aunt Jemima brand in the United States faced backlash for its racist origins, leading to a rebranding in 2021. As Catherine Squires notes, “Visual representations often carry the residues of historical injustices” (Squires 59).

Therefore, the semiotic power of mascots is a double-edged sword. While they can simplify and humanize, they can also distort and stereotype. Ethical branding requires constant reevaluation of the mascot’s symbolic baggage.

Case Studies in Impact

A 2015 study by the Journal of Advertising Research found that mascots increased brand recognition by 37% and message retention by 29% in print and TV ads (Smith and Turner 218). In India, the Vodafone Zoozoos, launched during IPL cricket season, became overnight sensations. Though not traditional mascots in form, they functioned similarly—unique, quirky, and deeply memorable. Within weeks, Vodafone’s brand recall increased significantly.

Another example is Nirma’s Washing Powder girl, dancing energetically with background music, representing affordability and strength. These mascots cut through the

advertising clutter because they are embodied metaphors—they show, not just tell.

Conclusion: Communicators in Disguise

Mascots are far more than branding tools. They are storytellers, emotional connectors, and cultural translators. Through a potent mix of pragmatics, psychology, and visual design, mascots enable brands to speak clearly in a crowded communicative landscape.

As Marshall McLuhan famously observed, “The medium is the message.” In advertising, mascots are a powerful medium—and often, they become the message itself. Their ability to encapsulate complex values in simple forms, to evoke emotion without speech, and to endure across generations makes them indispensable in the toolkit of effective communication.

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