

# Chapter 10

## Brand Anthropomorphism: Collegiate Mascots and Social Media

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter addresses brand anthropomorphism, in particular how sports mascots can be utilized on social media to increase emotional connectivity with fans and their affiliated teams. The history and role of mascots and present day usage encourages understanding of how narratives are a positive and promising tool for marketing communication professionals and those in the sports and entertainment industry. Interviews were conducted with personnel associated with mascots to gain insights into the concept of brand anthropomorphism. Also, an online survey was conducted on mascot brand attributes and results were presented. The ability to personify a brand has significant managerial implications, and this chapter demonstrates how social media platforms may drive brand loyalty.*

### INTRODUCTION

Goals. Assists. Touchdowns. Homeruns. Shutouts. Championship Records.

Statistics dominate the sports world, determining who sees field or floor time, when and where games are played, and in salary caps and arbitration. Statistics help determine successful seasons, assess coaching talent, measure athletic prowess, and provide clear evidence of whether a stadium's seats are packed or empty. These are the tangibles that make or break a sports bank, and the financial fallout to not only sports teams but also to the surrounding communities is significant.

In 2015, the global sports market had a value of approximately 145 billion U.S. dollars, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) revenue is now approaching the billion dollar mark in college sports (Statista, 2016). Whether you are a sports fanatic, casual fan or a student of marketing and communication, sports is big business. The managerial implications of anthropomorphism and sports are noteworthy, offering a mechanism to create strong feelings in fans by attributing human characteristics to the mascots and encouraging a sense of connectivity.

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Loyalty is heated and intense among fans, and sports organizations count on this. Social media has heightened this fervency, and it has become an important and relied upon platform for marketing the brand of a team. Social media allows organizations unparalleled levels of audience engagement (Littlewood, Bick, & Treen, 2017), so that online exchanges with customers may take place to encourage an emotional attachment extending far beyond any given game's win or loss.

Research into the determinants of sports emotional branding and loyalty has grown in recent years, but it did not include the variable of social media (Munnukka, Karjaluoto, & Hokkanen, 2017). This chapter provides history, context, and original information to further understanding of the topic. In particular, the chapter has three main objectives:

- To offer managers ideas and methods of personifying brands via mascots
- To demonstrate specific examples of social media being used successfully by collegiate teams to create innovative anthropomorphic marketing campaigns
- To increase awareness of trends in emotional branding

These objectives extend beyond the sports world and into business and nonprofit sectors. In all fields, brands are identities and offer meaning and value to an organization (Kozinets, 2017). The chapter begins, in Section 1, with a literature review on emotional branding. This section describes a model identifying stages of consumer choice and also addresses various types of emotions, which may ultimately impact purchasing decisions. Section 2 offers a historical context to anthropomorphism and how mascots may serve as critical links to the brand of a company. Section 3 details information on social networking as a valuable mechanism to connect consumers and fans. In Section 4, information gleaned from original interviews is given, providing inside understanding by individuals working closely with four well-known mascots. Section 5 moves from the previous qualitative research to original quantitative research undertaken. Data from an online survey addresses how respondents felt toward various attributes of mascot Twitter accounts. Section 6 identifies trends managers should be aware of for anthropomorphizing sports mascots. In particular, managers should consider the diversification of social media, offer more stadium-specific experiences for fans, provide more breadth and depth in mascot storytelling, and find more effective means to measure the value in emotional branding efforts. Section 7 constitutes the conclusion of the chapter, with a summary of the relevance and implications of using mascots for emotional branding purposes.

## **EMOTIONAL BRANDING**

In the last decade, literature regarding branding has focused on the important role of emotions as a mechanism to connect consumers and brands (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). The premise of emotional branding was discussed even before that, however, when it was realized that benefit-driven only approaches to brands may not have the longevity and enduring competitive advantage that a personal and meaningful bond between a consumer and a brand may possess (Luther, 2006). People tend to think of the world in terms of the human experience, and humans are emotional creatures at heart. Emotional branding is the feeling of attachment toward a specific brand, one which is relational in nature and often story-driven. Traits associated with emotional branding may be trust, resonance, companionship, and love (Rossiter & Bellman, 2012).

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