

Unleashing Charisma: The Impact of Bing Dwen Dwen On National Identity and Tourism In China

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ABSTRACT

Bing Dwen Dwen is a panda mascot that became the official mascot for Beijing's 2022 Winter Olympics in China. This research aims to identify and recognize the main factors that make Bing Dwen Dwen, popular and very eye-catching. Its charm attracts people from around the world and thus the second objective of this research is to analyze its impact on the tourism industry. Through qualitative and quantitative approaches, this research uses case studies, interviews with experts, and visitor surveys to reveal design elements and marketing strategies that contribute to the success of Bing Dwen Dwen. From all the approaches conducted, it is found that an attractive and relevant mascot design can effectively reflect cultural values, traditions, and unique characteristics of a country. Such mascots could also gain emotional attachment from the public, making the people have pride with their own country's emblem or symbol representation. The mascot's popularity also plays a role in strengthening China's national image and increasing its tourism appeal at the global level. Further analysis revealed that visual elements, such as color and shape, have a significant influence on people's perceptions. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of

strategic planning in mascot development, including public involvement and collaboration with experienced designers. The discovery provided insights for Indonesia in designing and creating tourism branding strategies, as well as strengthening national identity through mascots as a practical cultural promotional element.

Keywords: culture, mascot design, destination branding, marketing strategy, visual concept, China.

INTRODUCTION

A mascot is a visual representation that is often used as a symbol of a brand, organization, or even a country's tourist destination. As part of a communication and marketing strategy, mascots are important in building identity, increasing appeal, and creating emotional attachments with audiences (Abdurrohman et al., 2023). Mascots themselves can serve as an effective communication tool in raising short-term awareness and building long-term loyalty to a brand or destination. Awareness towards a destination is the first phase of building relationships with audiences. Bigger awareness campaigns effectively allow an entity to be more easily recognized and remembered by the public, thus the chances of further interactions are increased. In a marketing context, awareness acts as a foundation for consumers to consider a product or destination before finally planning (Radomskaya & Pearce, 2021).

Effective awareness development could be done through numerous strategies, such as the use of attractive visual elements, social media campaigns, and involvement in events or activities relevant to the target audience. By creating engaging, consistent characters with strong storytelling, mascots can help increase exposure and strengthen the brand or destination image in the minds of the audience (Reddy & Sathish, 2023). In addition, high awareness can also encourage word-of-mouth marketing, where impressed audiences are more likely to share their experiences with others. In today's digital era, the presence of mascots in online campaigns through social media, videos, and interactive content further strengthens the

potential of a brand or destination to attract attention and build closer relationships with consumers (Tjhie et al., 2023). Therefore, the development and expansion of strong awareness and sustainability are important keys in attracting and retaining consumers in the long run.

Mascot designs generally incorporate various visual elements, such as animals, plants, anthropomorphic characters, ideologies, and auspicious symbols that have deep meaning to the local culture. The existence of a mascot is not only an aesthetic element but also has symbolic value that can reflect cultural identity and strengthen an entity's image in the eyes of the public. The word "mascot" itself comes from the French *mascotte*, which means good luck, reflecting the hope that the presence of a mascot can bring good luck and strengthen the representation of a brand or country (Erdiana & Yurisma, 2022). Along with the development of experiential marketing strategies, mascots are now an important element in branding and promotion, especially in the tourism industry and international events, such as the Olympics and World Cup. The use of mascots in these events not only attracts public attention but also contributes to enhancing a country's image and tourism appeal through unique and meaningful design elements (Quan et al., 2024).



Figure 1. Bing Dwen Dwen
Source: ECNS Wire

Mascots were first used in the world of sports in the 19th century, with the main purpose of building an emotional connection between the audience and a brand or event. The presence of mascots has been proven to increase customer engagement and strengthen brand identity through distinctive and recognizable visual elements (Nauli et al., 2024). China has been spotted to have used mascots in sporting events since the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing, which featured PanPan, a panda mascot that symbolizes friendship and sportsmanship. From then on, mascots have become an important element in China's international sport events, including the 2008 Beijing Olympics with Fuwa and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics with Bing Dwen Dwen (see Fig. 1). In addition to serving as symbols of the event, these mascots also reflect China's cultural values and national identity, which in turn has an impact on increasing the country's tourism appeal and international promotion (Pavliv & Zeqian, 2024). With the increase of mascot-based marketing strategies, many companies and institutions in China have begun to adopt the use of mascots as part of their brand identity, given their effectiveness in building emotional connections with consumers and influencing their purchasing decisions (Qiu, 2022).

Along with the increasing popularity of mascots in various sporting events, their development in China has diversified, covering various sectors such as tourism, banking, technology, and the entertainment industry. The government and major companies in China are beginning to realize the potential of mascots as powerful communication tools, not only in the context of sports but also in building closer relationships with the public (Qiu, 2022). One example of a mascot regarding tourism promotion is Niu Niu, the cow from the 2010 Shanghai Expo and the echoing Hainan Coconut Palm character as a symbol of tourism promotion in Hainan. In the banking and financial services sector, some institutions have developed mascots with friendly and welcoming designs to increase trust and attract the younger generation.

With so many mascot developments in various sectors, this trend shows that mascots are not just decorative elements, but effective marketing strategies in building identity, increasing engagement, and strengthening the image of a brand

or destination at the local and global levels. The success of mascots in various sports and industrial events in China confirms that the use of mascots have great potential in influencing consumer behavior and supporting economic growth through stronger promotion and branding (Qiu, 2022). In addition, the development of digital technology is also driving innovation in mascot design and interaction. Many mascots now come in digital form with augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, allowing them to communicate interactively with audiences (Kusuma et al., 2022). Mascots now not only come in physical or digital form, but are also developed in the form of merchandise, animations, and social media campaigns that further expand their reach and appeal.

One example of a mascot that has captured the hearts of many people in the context of a country's tourism is the Formosan Black Bear in Taiwan. This all-eating black bear is endemic and native to Taiwan. The country that invented the *boba milk tea* took the opportunity to preserve this endangered animal and make them Taiwan's tourism mascot to remind people that nature is fragile, and ecologically sustainable tourism is important. OhBear is the name given to Taiwan's black bear mascot. This adorable character designed by the Tourism Administration of Taiwan's Ministry of Transportation was appointed as the head of the tourism administration's super task team that is expected to increase tourism (Wang & Zhou, 2021).

Taiwan itself, in addition to the OhBear mascot (see fig. 2), also holds various events involving this black bear character such as visiting local schools, making movies and matchmaking events in 2020, and making so many merchandises or souvenirs that tourists can take back to their country (see fig. 3). Such has been the impact of using and spreading the word about this endangered bear that almost every Taiwanese citizen owns at least one item with OhBear's image emblazoned on it. The mascot has also managed to boost Taiwan's tourism with its uniqueness and cuteness.



Figure 2. OhBear cookie gift set.
Source: Taiwan Waves of Wonders

Competition that increases every year in the tourism sector makes the process of bringing in tourists more difficult due to the rapid development of the tourism industry at the national and international levels. Therefore, a strategy is needed with the ultimate goal of winning the competition (Suhartapa, 2021). Tourism can be said as one of the biggest boosters of Indonesia's economy after oil and chemicals. In addition to the addition of foreign exchange, tourism is also one of the driving factors in the growth of national welfare, such as expanding employment and minimizing unemployment. The important role played by the tourism sector in running the wheels of a country's economy, where the high level of tourists who come can make currency rates increase, or exchange rate appreciation (Prayitno et al., 2023). An important point of tourism is that this field can help build brand value, image, and identification in a country (Naseem & Dionísio, 2021).

National identity refers to the distinctive identity of a country that is not owned by other countries (Sumaludin, 2018). A strong identity can make a destination more unique with differences, comparisons with other destinations. Elements of national identity uniqueness include natural scenery, architecture, and historical stories. These three elements are an attraction for tourists to come and visit, with a thick and unique history that varies from place to place. This creates a favorable

environment for the growth of the tourism sector. The existence of a solid national identity can encourage investment in the tourism infrastructure sector, such as museums, cultural centers, and tourist attractions reflecting local character (Dyah et al., 2022).

From the data acquired, it is found that the trends in mascot designs in the past 10 years is the creation of new characters that uses the elements of a country and succeeds in representing their values. One example is the mascot of the 2018 ASEAN Games, where there are three mascots namely Bhin Bhin, Atung, and Kaka. These three mascots are derived from the motto Bhineka Tunggal Ika, where each mascot represents one word. The three characters are designed in the form of endangered native Indonesian animals, and each character uses attributes that reflect typical Indonesian characteristics (Jhalugilang et al., 2018).

Some questions that surfaced while conducting this research are:

1. How exactly do mascots contribute to promoting a country's tourism and cultural diplomacy?
2. What traits and factors contribute to the success of mascots?
3. What key factors influence the effectiveness of mascots in enhancing brand identity, driving commercialization, and fostering public engagement?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a mixed methods approach, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, to analyze the role of mascots as a cultural diplomacy tool in shaping national identity and encouraging tourism interest to foreigners. The population in this study includes tourists who have visited destinations that use mascots as part of the promotional strategy. Data was collected through an online survey to obtain quantitative information on tourists' perceptions of mascots, including their visual appeal, emotional attachment, and influence on tourism decisions. In addition, this study also applied content analysis to various promotional materials, such as marketing campaigns, social media, and official publications, to understand how mascots are used in building the image of tourist

destinations to customers. This approach allows researchers to gain deeper insights into the effectiveness of mascots in the context of tourism branding and cultural diplomacy. The methods used include:

1. **Quantitative survey:** Through a questionnaire, this study collected data from 50 tourists to measure their perceptions and behaviors regarding the importance of mascots in driving tourism interest. Statistical analysis was used to identify patterns and significant relationships.
2. **Qualitative analysis:** This research involved an in-depth analysis of various promotional materials featuring mascots, to identify how the mascots impact tourism. Content analysis was used to identify themes, patterns and meanings contained in the content.

The mixed method carried out by combining these two approaches, this research aims to provide a richer and more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study, so as to produce more valid and reliable findings (Dawadi et al., 2021). In this research, 3 main stages were carried out to complete and detail the information. The initial stage of this research began by conducting a comprehensive literature study with the aim of understanding the concepts of mascot, destination branding, and cultural diplomacy. The research also included observations of various promotional materials, such as tourism websites, social media and print publications, to identify trends in the use of mascots in tourist destination marketing strategies. In the next stage, in-depth interviews were conducted with mascot design experts to gain more comprehensive understanding of the creative process, challenges, and success factors in creating effective mascots.

In parallel, an online survey was distributed to tourists to collect quantitative data regarding their perceptions of mascots. The survey covered various aspects, such as tourists' level of familiarity with the mascot, design appeal, the mascot's influence on the decision to visit a destination, and preferences for mascot design elements. The final stage of the research involved a thorough data analysis based on the results of the interviews, survey, and content analysis. Quantitative analysis was used to identify patterns and trends in the survey data, while qualitative analysis aimed to explore the deeper meanings of the interviews and observations

of the promotional materials. This combination of approaches allowed research to provide a more holistic insight into the role of mascots in cultural diplomacy and tourism marketing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mascots as Tools for Tourism and Cultural Diplomacy

A mascot is not only used as a visual element for decorative components only. Instead, they play a big role in creating a strong and unique identity, communicating messages and meanings, and increasing the sense of interest of the audience or visitors (Hermanto et al., 2024). The data from 50 respondents, predominantly aged 20 (47.2%),

Tourism Interest and Cultural Connection

When asked whether they had ever visited China, 88.9% responded "no", yet 33.3% expressed familiarity with Bing Dwen Dwen. Despite the low visitation rate, this recognition indicates a level of cultural exposure mediated through international events such as the Winter Olympics. A substantial 63.9% of respondents acknowledged knowing about mascots from other countries, showing a general awareness of mascots as national representations. Interestingly, when asked if a mascot had ever influenced their decision to visit a destination, only 13.9% said yes, while 44.4% said "maybe", suggesting potential but not definite influence. The survey showed that 63.9% of respondents recognized at least one type of mascot from countries around the world, including Singapore, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Australia, and China (see fig. 4).

Apakah sebelumnya anda pernah mengetahui maskot dari suatu negara?

36 responses

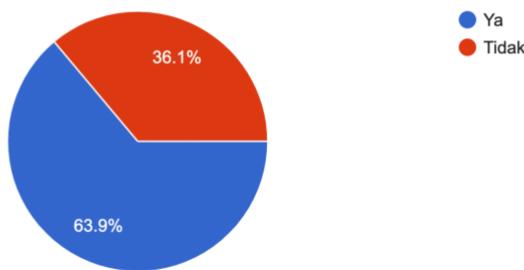


Figure 3. Indonesian respondents' knowledge of a country's mascot
source: author's documentation

Interestingly, some respondents specifically mentioned the Chinese Olympic mascot, indicating that Bing Dwen Dwen is one of the more well-known and memorable mascots among all the mascots out there. About 33.3% of respondents were very familiar with Bing Dwen Dwen, while the rest claimed to be not very familiar. Despite not being familiar with the mascot before, 37.1% of the respondents rated Bing Dwen Dwen's design as moderately attractive by choosing the middle scale of 3 on a scale from 1 to 5. Additionally, 28.6% gave it a score of 4, and 20% rated it the highest score of 5, indicating a generally positive impression. Meanwhile, only 14.3% chose a score of 2, and no respondents selected the lowest score of 1 (see fig. 5).

Seberapa menarik Anda menganggap desain maskot tersebut?

35 responses

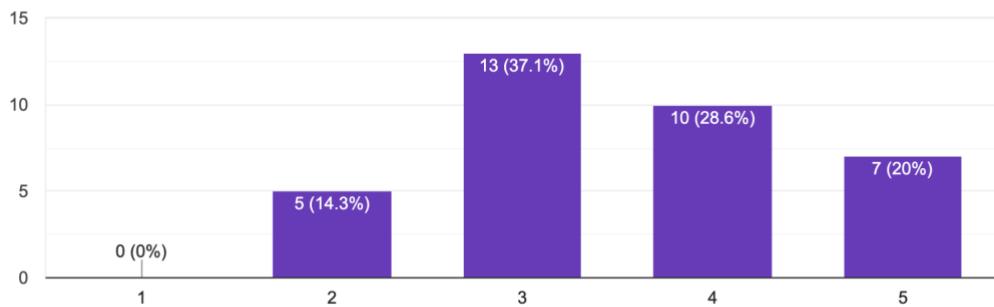


Figure 4. Indonesian respondents' of how attractive Bing Dwen Dwen is

Source: author's documentation

The mascot's potential as a cultural ambassador is reinforced by perceptions of its effectiveness: 47.2% rated Bing Dwen Dwen a 4 out of 5 in delivering Chinese cultural values, with another 22.2% rating it a 5. These findings underline the mascot's success in serving as a soft power tool, introducing aspects of Chinese identity in a way that is accessible and engaging to international audiences.

The results of interviews with 10 participants, consisting of 5 people in Taiwan and 5 people in Indonesia, further confirm these findings. The majority of interview participants stated that mascots play an important role in promoting a country's tourism as they can push people's curiosity about a particular place or event and shape public perception of the country. Respondents also agreed that incorporating cultural elements in mascot design can strengthen the emotional attachment between local people and tourists, thus making mascots more widely accepted.

Emotional Appeal and Identity

In terms of emotional connection, participants were asked how much the mascot influenced their perception of a Country. The responses leaned toward moderate impact, with 41.7% rating the mascot's influence a 3, and 36.1% a 4. These ratings

suggest that while Bing Dwen Dwen or any other mascot is not the sole factor shaping national image, it plays a notable role in identity construction and perception, especially among international youth audiences exposed through media.

Seberapa besar pengaruh maskot dalam membentuk persepsi Anda tentang suatu negara?

36 responses

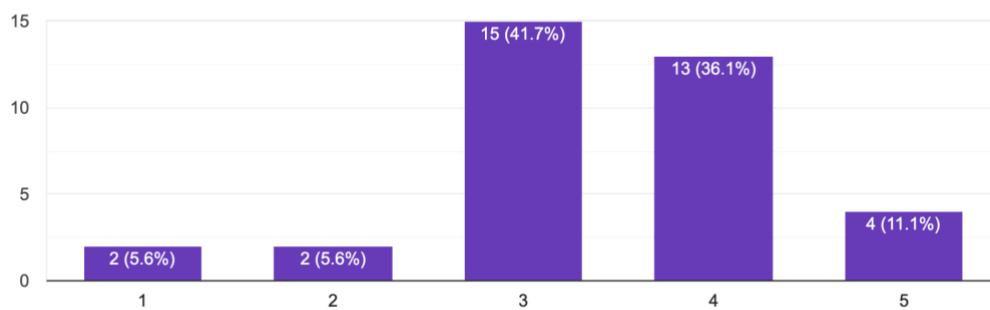


Figure 5. Indonesian respondents about the influence of mascot to a country image
Source: author's documentation

2. Key Success Factors of Mascots: Design, Branding, and Economic Impact

Design Effectiveness

When asked about the most important design feature in a mascot, 44.4% prioritized “shape,” followed by 36.1% for “meaning,” showing that both visual form and cultural relevance are crucial to mascot acceptance. The combination of a panda (a national symbol) and winter-themed elements seems to resonate with viewers' expectations of meaningful design.

Based on interviews conducted, it is proven to people that Bing Dwen Dwen's mascot design is a clear example of how a well-designed mascot can effectively represent a country's cultural identity while attracting people's attention. Despite its apparent simplicity, Bing Dwen Dwen's design has a deep symbolic meaning.

The use of the panda showcases China's national icon, while its transparent ice suit symbolizes technology and innovation in winter sports. This futuristic shell adds to its appeal while connecting the mascot to the Winter Olympics theme. The success of this design highlights that an effective mascot involves not only aesthetic appeal but also storytelling and cultural representation.



Figure 6. Volunteers dressed in costumes of the two mascots at the 2022 Winter Olympics
Source: Wikipedia

Branding and Commercial Appeal

Mascots have evolved into more than just event symbols or visual identities. They are now used widely in marketing, promotion, education, tourism, and entertainment industries (Hidayah et al., 2022). In sports, mascots like Bing Dwen Dwen serve as icons that attract attention and encourage emotional loyalty to events or brands. Countries also use mascots in tourism to enhance destination appeal, using cultural themes as branding tools.

Bing Dwen Dwen became a global phenomenon, with high demand for merchandise such as dolls, clothing, and accessories (Palladino et al., 2022). The long queues and rapid stock depletion demonstrate mascots' economic impact. 58.3% of survey respondents expressed a desire to purchase Bing Dwen Dwen merchandise, showing that mascots can become lucrative tools for the creative economy.



Figure 7. Bing Dwen Dwen merchandise
Source: www.globaltimes.cn

Strategic Use and Limitations

One key strategy in Bing Dwen Dwen's success was its time-limited availability during the Olympics, creating exclusivity and boosting collectability. However, this also limited its long-term potential as a tourism driver, since China's appeal lies in broader attractions such as heritage, landscapes, and cuisine. To maintain mascot relevance post-event, China leveraged both physical (standees, city decor) and digital (social media, campaigns) forms.

Merchandising also helped prolong interest. Official products remained in demand even after the games, turning Bing Dwen Dwen into a lasting symbol of the event. These monetization efforts underline the mascot's broader economic and branding value.

Digital Engagement and Social Media Strategies

In the digital era, social media is essential for branding mascots. Survey respondents unanimously agreed that platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were effective in enhancing mascot visibility and appeal. The presence of mascots on social media can create a more lively and relatable persona, thereby increasing audience engagement and building a stronger emotional connection with the global community (Cintya, 2024)

One strategy that has proven to be successful is to give the mascot a unique personality that reflects the value or purpose it is trying to convey. Respondents preferred that mascots have their own social media accounts and deliver entertaining content through a humorous approach and active interaction with followers. Mascots that are given anthropomorphic characters have proven to be more appealing and easier to relate to different walks of life (Deligöz & Ünal, 2021). Such mascots not only keep up with the latest trends but can also relate their content to popular issues, thus remaining relevant and continuously discussed by a wider audience.

Social media virality breaks geographical barriers, making mascots like Bing Dwen Dwen global icons. Features such as polls, filters, and challenges further increase interaction and awareness. For nations like Indonesia, a similar digital-first strategy should be a core component in national mascot development.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to analyze the role of mascots in branding a country or a place and its impact on tourism, with Bing Dwen Dwen mascots as a case study. Based on the research findings, we conclude that mascots have an important role in representing and promoting a country's identity, being the first visual element, the tourists see once entering a country. Although we learn that mascots are not the main reason most tourists visit a country, still their presence adds meaning and characteristics to a country and strengthens the branding strategy, especially if designed with relevant and memorable visual elements.

Bing Dwen Dwen is a successful example of a mascot that effectively integrates cultural elements and marketing strategies. Its eye-catching, unique and symbolic design has built a strong identity, attracted people's attention, and increased China's tourism appeal. Bing Dwen Dwen demonstrates that with the right visual representation a mascot can strengthen the national image and even give significant economic impact through merchandise sales and increased tourist arrivals. The study also confirms that mascots are not just aesthetic elements, but also cultural diplomacy and destination branding tools that can strengthen a country's identity at the international level.

The implications of this research point to the importance of strategic planning in the creation of mascots, both in terms of design and marketing. Indonesia could benefit from creating a mascot that embodies its unique cultural heritage—such as traditional textiles, endangered animals like the Komodo dragon, or regional mythology—combined with modern visual storytelling. Community involvement in the design process and integration with digital marketing campaigns (e.g., gamified experiences, social media challenges) can ensure stronger public engagement and broader appeal. In addition, mascots can support the involvement of the younger generation through digital media and serve as a means of cultural education. However, this research has limitations, especially in the scope of the case study that only focuses on one mascot, so it might not fully

figure out all the impact of mascots in various cultural contexts and other tourist destinations.

This research also opens opportunities for further exploration of how mascots can be integrated into long-term promotional strategies and not just limited to specific events. Further research is recommended to explore the effectiveness of mascots in different tourism regions and sectors to develop a more comprehensive framework for mascot-based branding strategies. Future studies could also examine the role of community involvement in mascot creation and its impact on public perception. By learning from the success of Bing Dwen Dwen and many other mascots from around the world, Indonesia can design a mascot that has global appeal while reflecting its rich local culture and strengthening its national identity. This approach can create a more sustainable impact and strengthen the emotional connection between tourists and the promoted destination. Although this research has uncovered the key success factors of Bing Dwen Dwen and its impact on tourism, there is still room for further research. Some aspects that could be explored include:

1. Post-Event Branding Impact: Investigate how a mascot's influence on a destination's image evolves 1–3 years after the associated event, assessing whether initial tourist interest translates into sustained growth in visitation or brand recognition.
2. Cross-Cultural Mascot Design Analysis: Conduct a comparative study of mascot designs from countries with successful tourism campaigns (for example Japan's Kumamon, Korea's Soohorang) to identify which cultural elements and design strategies consistently drive engagement and recognition. And what kind of marketing makes it even more popular.
3. Behavioral Influence on Travel Decisions: Analyze how specific mascot characteristics (relatability, cultural symbolism, digital presence) affect travelers' destination preferences and purchasing behavior related to tourism merchandise and experiences.

With further research, it is hoped that deeper insights into the role of mascots in branding and cultural diplomacy can be obtained, as well as a reference for other countries in developing more effective and sustainable promotional strategies.

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