Mascot as Government's KOL: A Case Study of Big Waster in Hong Kong

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Abstract: Recently, the Hong Kong government's use of mascots is becoming popular. Through the case study of Big Waster, the mascot of the Hong Kong Environmental Protection Department, this research aims to reveal strategies of deploying mascots on social media communication and their limitations. Big Waster has been personified as a Key Opinion Leader (KOL), who is defined as somebody who is an expert on a certain topic and whose opinions are well-respected, to share its environmental tips. This qualitative research applied McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model (MTM) to find out how meanings borne by Big Waster transferred to policies and ultimately people. Ten posts with altogether 2340 comments were selected from Big Waster's Facebook account for close analysis. The findings reveal a particular strategy at each of the three MTM stages, namely, emotional engagement with audience through anthropomorphism at the pre-endorsement stage; timely parody of popular culture at the endorsement stage; and tactical use of social media to drive actions at the post-endorsement stage. Using the findings of this case study, future research could work towards guidelines for the public sector's deployment of mascots on social media.

Keywords: Mascot communication, cultural communication, public communication, environmental communication, climate communication, United Nations, sustainable development goals (SDG), social media, KOL, key opinion leader, Hong Kong government, Cantonese

1. Introduction

Mascots have become popular not only in commercial sectors but also in the public sector, particularly serving as ambassadors for tourism promotion. Examples like Kumamon from Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan have gained worldwide recognition (Soltani et al., 2018). In Hong Kong, government departments have recognized the strategic value of mascots in public communication, and one successful example is the Environmental Protection Department's (EPD's) mascot, Big Waster (Figure 1), introduced in 2013. By analyzing the content of Big Waster's social media posts and comments, one can gain insights into the effectiveness and limitations of using mascots for public communication.

Big Waster's unexpected popularity can be attributed to its unique and unconventional image, which sets it apart from typical cute mascots. Launched in 2013 by the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) as the ambassador for the Food Wise Hong Kong Campaign, Big Waster's design features wide eyes and a small body, symbolizing the concept of "eyes are bigger than the stomach." This design serves as a reminder to avoid food wastage. Interestingly, the mascot's orange-brown appearance can evoke a fecal association. This is in contrast to most cute mascots, which always feature a friendly expression and a pair of big round eyes such as the Japanese fictional character Hello Kitty. The designer, Wong Ka-ming, who is also the creative director of a design house, intended to convey government messages in an unconventional manner, capturing public interest (Siu, 2022). Through extensive coverage in mass media, social media, and outdoor advertising, Big Waster's image has become deeply ingrained in the public consciousness. It has been actively promoting various environmental measures aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs), including energy conservation (SDG 7 Affordable and clean energy), sustainable transportation (SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities), plastic reduction and waste management schemes (SDG 12 Responsible consumption and production), and climate change mitigation (SDG 13 Climate action). Big Waster utilizes its own social media accounts to constantly post related messages in a humorous manner, often playing different roles. It has also been utilized to promote other important issues such as anti-epidemic measures, exemplified by demonstrating how to use Covid test kits. This widespread adoption of Big Waster as a communication tool demonstrates its popularity and effectiveness in engaging the public and conveying important messages.

Figure 1. Big Waster features eyes bigger than stomach. Source: Big Waster's Facebook account.

2. Literature Review

The term "mascot," derived from the French word "mascotte," refers to a person, animal, or object believed to bring good fortune (Schattschneider, 2005). Many mascots are designed in an anthropomorphic manner, giving them a human-like appearance (Radomskaya & Pearce, 2021; Xu et al., 2022). Anthropomorphic objects have the power to leave a lasting impression on individuals, and their behavior and expressions can influence how people perceive the world (Cayla, 2013). This psychological connection with mascots, particularly the cute ones, is attributed to the warmth and pleasant characteristics they evoke (Septianto & Paramita, 2021). Organizations often utilize mascots, especially those with anthropomorphic traits, to strengthen a sense of shared identity (Martin et al., 2014). Mascots have the ability to generate feelings of belonging and trust (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004), making them effective in uniting fans and attracting people to businesses (Butler et al., 2020). Existing literature has extensively explored the benefits of using cute mascots in promotional campaigns. However, research on the impact of non-cute mascots is relatively rare.

Existing scholarship on mascots predominantly focuses on their use in tourism and sports promotion, while there is limited research on their use by governments. In Japan, almost every prefecture has its own mascot as an ambassador (Yoda & Alt, 2007), with Kumamon created by the Kumamoto prefecture in 2010 being the most successful example (Soltani et al., 2018). Mascots are also widely utilized by sports teams as a means of branding and engaging fans, providing unique experiences (Ko et al., 2022). The Olympic mascot serves as a crucial ambassador, connecting the event, the host country, and the public, conveying

emotions, thoughts, and sensations (Fontes & Lodi, 2023). While mascots have been employed in environmental measure promotion, there is a paucity of related studies on the effectiveness of environmental mascots (Butler et al., 2020). For instance, the United States has successfully used Smokey Bear for over 70 years to raise awareness about forest fire prevention, with 96% of US adults recognizing the mascot (Martin et al., 2014). This indicates that mascots can serve as a simple and cost-effective solution for environmental issues, influencing behavior change (Butler et al., 2020). However, limited research has explored how mascots can be effectively utilized for environmental management, raising awareness, and driving behavioral change (Butler et al., 2020). To address this research gap, the following five research questions have been formulated:

(1) Why are people drawn to non-cute mascots?
(2) What are the strategies deployed when using mascots in public communication on social media?
(3) What makes mascot an effective tool for the government to communicate environmental measures with the members of the public?
(4) How can these strategies be transferred to other types of policies?
(5) What are the limitations of using mascots in public communication?

3. Theoretical Framework

The Meaning Transfer Model (MTM), developed by McCracken (1989) to analyze endorsers, is applied to this research to examine the influence of mascots as endorsers on people's response to environmental protection measures. The MTM emphasizes the transfer of symbolic meanings from endorsers to products, brands, or, in the case of this research, government policies and measures (Tian et al., 2022). Endorsers refer to public figures deployed to promote something by showing their presence in a promotional campaign (Li et al., 2022). McCracken (1989) pointed out that, in addition to celebrities, mascots can be endorsers that leave a deeper and more positive impression in consumers' minds and make the product and brand more memorable (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). The meanings transferred from mascots can significantly impact people's responses to products or measures, and consumers are more likely to believe in the endorsed message (Miller & Allen, 2012; Srivastava, 2021). Notably, both positive and negative qualities of endorsers can be transferred to the endorsed entities (Tian et al., 2022).

The MTM consists of three stages: pre-endorsement, endorsement, and post-endorsement. In the pre-endorsement stage, the mental image of the endorser is formed based on their roles, campaigns, and traits. During the endorsement stage, meanings are transferred from the endorser to the product or measure. Finally, in the post-endorsement stage, meanings are transferred from the product or measure to consumers through their purchase or consumption behaviors (McCracken, 1989). In the context of this research, meanings are transferred from the environmental protection measures to the public, who then take actions. To apply the MTM, Jain and Roy's (2016) seven dimensions of endorser meanings, including personality, credibility, physical appearance, feelings, performance, values, and identity, are adopted. Despite limited research on public bodies' use of mascots, this study utilizes the MTM, which is commonly used to analyze endorsement marketing, to examine how mascots as endorsers influence people's response to environmental protection measures.

Big Waster, with its anthropomorphic qualities and active social media presence, can be likened to a Key Opinion Leader (KOL). KOLs are influential individuals who focus on sharing specific subjects on social media and have a significant public following, distinguishing them from influencers who cover various wide-ranging areas (Xiong et al., 2021). By sharing their experiences on social media, KOLs have the ability to influence

people's thoughts and actions (Turcotte et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2018). KOLs do not necessarily require expertise in a particular field, as Sah and Fugh-Berman (2013) noted that the most desirable quality for a KOL is not expertise but other factors such as relatability and common habits. Xiong et al. (2021) found that familiarity and trustworthiness significantly impact the effectiveness of KOLs. KOLs are effective in building brand image and can contribute to successful marketing campaigns. The primary role of a KOL is to influence the audience rather than lead them to think critically, as their main focus is fulfilling their marketing role (Scher & Schett, 2021). In the case of Big Waster, its active presence on social media and engagement with fans aligns with the characteristics of a KOL, as it aims to influence and shape people's perceptions and behaviors related to environmental protection.

4. Method

In this research, the main social media platform for analysis is Facebook. As of June 2024, Big Waster has amassed 100,500 followers on its Facebook account since its establishment in 2014, whereas its Instagram account, created in 2015, has gathered 20,300 followers. The popularity of Big Waster on Facebook is evident as the parent company Meta has certified its account with a blue tick, a distinction typically reserved for human celebrities but rare for non-human entities. Notably, posts on Facebook tend to receive higher viewership and engagement compared to those on Instagram. For instance, one of Big Waster's most popular posts, titled "Want to see you recycling everyday", garnered 3984 likes and 137 comments on Facebook, including dialogue exchanges between fans and Big Waster. In contrast, the same post on Instagram received 3418 likes and 11 comments. Therefore, the substantial engagement and higher response rate on Big Waster's Facebook account make it the focal point for data collection and analysis in this study.

The author examined Big Waster's posts on Facebook over a three-year period from May 2021 to May 2024. This timeframe was chosen to capture the evolving environmental policies, including initiatives such as plastic bans and waste charging schemes, which have been actively promoted by the government. By focusing on a relatively recent period, the analysis avoids outdated posts that may not align with current policies. To begin the analysis, the author sorted the top 30 posts based on the highest number of "likes", ranging from 9451 to 1137. This ensured that the selected posts had a substantial number of views and captured public attention. For example, the post titled "Horizontal notebook" received the highest number of 9451 "likes" and 262 "comments". Conversely, a post titled "Move for green" had 4150 "likes" but only had 25 "comments". Due to the limited number of comments, posts like this were not included in the analysis despite the large number of "likes". Among the sorted posts, the author selected seven posts with more than 100 comments for close reading. Additionally, exceptions were made for posts related to government-promoted measures in 2024. Despite receiving fewer "likes", these posts garnered several hundred comments, indicating the emergence of debates on some controversial measures. Three of these posts were selected for analysis. Furthermore, some Instagram posts that were released as a series alongside specific Facebook posts were also analyzed. Overall, 10 Facebook posts with a total of 2340 comments were selected as samples for textual and visual analyses. Following the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), the author employed an iterative process of open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurring content categories, themes, and patterns in the sample material. To preserve the meaning during the translation process, the author collected early-stage data and conducted coding in the original language (Chinese Cantonese), with English translation completed before writing up the research. Drawing from the theoretical framework of the Meaning Transfer Model (MTM), the coding results were categorized into three stages (pre-endorsement, endorsement, and post-endorsement) and a

set of strategies which were found to characterize these three stages, namely, emotional engagement, timely parodying, and action taking. These findings will be further discussed in the subsequent analysis below.

5. Results

5.1 Stage 1 Pre-Endorsement (Emotional Engagement)

Anthropomorphism plays a crucial role in establishing the meaning of Big Waster, which is closely associated with Wong Kam-sing, the former Secretary for the Environmental Bureau. The resemblance of appearance between the mascot and the official adds to the relatability and perceived credibility of Big Waster (Siu, 2022). Unlike typical cute mascots, Big Waster achieves its impact through its unconventional and ugly appearance. Its narrative revolves around transforming from a character with a food waste problem to one that values conservation. Over time, additional habits like recycling, energy saving, and climate change awareness were integrated into its story. Big Waster's appearance symbolizes its past wrongdoing, with eyes bigger than its stomach, serving as a reminder of Hongkongers' habit of wasting food, contributing to the city's municipal waste. The phantom-like quality of its appearance further reinforces the theme of confronting personal demons. Its Chinese name, "大嘥鬼" [Big Waste Ghost] [*daai saai gwai*], emphasizes this demon-like concept. However, some Facebook users have expressed confusion about Big Waster's communication, questioning its name and inconsistent portrayal as both a good and bad character. Moreover, some individuals find its appearance disgusting, claiming it scares children. Nevertheless, these debates and discussions have captured public attention, highlighting the unconventional approach used to create meaning for a non-cute mascot.

   Not only does the creator treat Big Waster as a person, but its followers as well. Fans affectionately refer to Big Waster as "鬼鬼" [Ghost Ghost] [*gwai gwai*], a common practice in Chinese culture where one doubles up on a syllable in a person's given name to create an endearing nickname. Many fans find Big Waster "adorable" and express interest in purchasing miniatures of the mascot. Big Waster jokingly responds that there would be badges available, so that fans can "掛住我" [wear me or miss me] [*gwaa zyu ngo*]. Supporters regard Big Waster as an exemplary civil servant and suggest that it advises its boss, meaning the government, for improvement. One fan even states that Big Waster surpasses many senior officials by solving one problem each day, totaling 365 problems solved. However, the implementation of controversial measures, such as the waste charging scheme promoted by Big Waster, has caused some individuals to find it "detestable" and express a desire to "unfollow" its social media account. Nonetheless, there are those who sympathize with Big Waster and offer comfort, acknowledging its efforts in the face of significant challenges. These negative comments, though present, underscore the emotional attachment many fans have developed towards Big Waster. The overall emotional connection between Big Waster and its followers is evident through the use of affectionate nicknames, expressions of adoration, and even sympathy during times of criticism.

   Big Waster's genderless image enables it to form emotional connections with a diverse range of individuals. Initially, one design option for Big Waster included a hairy chest, which would have associated the character with being male. However, this option was discarded to allow for flexible interpretations of its gender, ensuring that Big Waster could fit into various roles and engage a broader audience (Siu, 2022). For instance, in one post titled "想見你 Recycling Everyday" [Want to see you Recycling Everyday] [*seung gin nei* Recycling Everyday] (Figure 2a), Big Waster is portrayed as a girl with a ponytail and a skirt, standing

outside a recycling community center. Some fans find this female portrayal "好索" [very sexy] [*hou sok*].

In another post, Big Waster is depicted as a loyal boyfriend who persists in recycling (Figure 2b), aiming to build a sustainable future with his girlfriend. These different portrayals of Big Waster in various gender roles allow for diverse interpretations and emotional connections with a wide audience. By adopting different characters and traits, Big Waster effectively establishes meaning and engages with its audience. Anthropomorphism plays a crucial role in shaping these different interpretations and establishing the overall significance of the mascot.

(a)   **(b)**

Figure 2. (a): Described by fans as "sexy" in a girlish look. **(b)**: Loyal boyfriend persists in recycling. Source: Big Waster's Facebook account.

5.2 Stage 2 Endorsement (Timely Parodying)

Big Waster captures public attention by using timely parodies derived from popular culture, a common strategy in commercial marketing. According to Jain and Roy (2016), the actions of endorsers and consumers' knowledge play a crucial role in transferring meanings to the product. In the case of Big Waster, its posts and actions, along with the followers' familiarity with the context, help convey its intended meanings to specific measures or policies. The top three posts that gained the most "likes" in the past years were secondary works inspired by popular movies and pop culture, earning Big Waster praise from followers as being "a smart boy" and the production team for timely incorporation of popular culture references. This strategy allows Big Waster to engage its audience effectively and draw attention to important issues.

Big Waster gains attention by parodying controversial or blockbuster movie posters. One post titled "橫簿" [horizontal notebook] [*waang bou*] (Figure 3a) received 9451 "likes" and 262 "comments". It plays on the homophonic similarity between this title and "環保" [environmental protection] [*waan bou*]. The post parodies the movie *Lamb,* known as "羊懼"

[lamb phobia] [*joeng geoi*] in Hong Kong, which is homophonic to "陽具" [penis] [*joeng geoi*] (Figure 3b).

(a)*

(b)#

(c)*

(d)#

(e)*

(f)

Figure 3. (a) "橫簿" [Horizontal notebook] [*waang bou*], which sounds similar to environmental protection [*waan bou*]. **(b)** Film *Lamb*. **(c)** Big Waster Conscience. **(d)**

Film *Guilty Conscience*. (**e**) Ghost Ghost likes taking tram. (**f**) Pop star Keung to offered free tram ride on his birthday (own photo). * Source: Big Waster's Facebook account. # Source: The Movie Database.

The attention-grabbing title sparked discussions in Hong Kong. Big Waster is depicted gazing at a green notebook with a mountainscape backdrop, urging people to fill up their notebooks before getting new ones to avoid being haunted by a "ghost". While some followers praised the message and echoed it with comments about leading a green life and recycling, others criticized the post for an error in the homophone wordplay of "橫" [waang] [horizontal] and "環" [waan] [environment], and questioned the government's environmental credibility due to ecological disasters caused by land reclamation as they were reminded by the mountainscape backdrop. In another successful post titled "Big Waster Conscience" (Figure 3c), parodying the highest-grossing Hong Kong film *Guilty Conscience* (Figure 3d), Big Waster takes on the roles of a barrister and the God of Food Treasure. The Chinese title "綠舌大狀" [Green Tongue Barrister] [*luk sit daai jong*] references the movie's title, "毒舌大狀" [Poisonous Tongue Barrister] [*duk sit daai jong*], and their halo symbolizes righteousness.

The post promotes the importance of avoiding food waste with the slogan "食幾多嗌幾多 惜食自在人心" [Order the amount of food you can eat. Treasure food out of guilty conscience] [*sik gei do aai gei do sik sik ji joi yan sam*] To bring the mascot to life, a dialogue between Big Waster as the barrister and a defendant was created.

"被告, 點解你次次都硬係食剩嘢? 究竟問題出咗喺邊度?"

[*Defendant, why do you always have leftover? What's wrong with you?*]
[*bei gou，dim gaai nei chi chi dou ngaang hai sik jing ye! Gau ging man tai cheut jo hai bin dou?*]

"我冇嘥嘢㗎~啲嘢唔啱食咋嘛~唔小心嗌多咗啫~我冇心㗎~"

[*I didn't waste anything~The food doesn't suit me~I mistakenly ordered a bit too much~I didn't mean to waste food~*"]
[*ngo mou saai ye ga~di ye m ngaam sik ja ma~m siu sam aai do jo je~ngo mou sam ga~*]

"喺我「惜」食之神面前, 喺 2023 年, 我將會化身為綠舌大狀, 批駁所有食剩嘢嘅 謬誤!"

[*For those who waste food, it's pointless to give me any excuse. In 2023, I play the role of Green Tongue Barrister to condemn anyone who wastes food!*]
[*hai ngo sik sik ji san min chin, hai 2023 nin, ngo jeung wui fa san wai luk sit daai jong, pai bok so yau sik jing ye ge mau ng!*]

The post received the first response from the film protagonist Dayo Wong, who wrote, "嘢 食面前, 人人惜食! 唔係就 everything is wrong!" [In front of food, everyone should treasure! otherwise everything is wrong!] [*ye sik min chin, yan yan sik sik! m hai jau everything is wrong!*]

This addition of a celebrity endorsement further enhanced the promotion of the Food Wise Hong Kong Campaign. Followers resonated with the message, replying with messages such as "惜食是真理" [Treasure food is the truth] [*sik sik si jan lei*], "食得是福" [Eating is a blessing] [*sik dak si fuk*]. Parodying popular movies not only captures attention but also effectively reinforces the underlying messages conveyed by the mascot.

Parodying pop icons allows fans to easily understand the intended messages by leveraging the icons' existing reputation. For example, the post titled "鬼鬼愛搭叮叮" [Ghost Ghost likes taking tram] [*gwai gwai oi daap ding ding*] (Figure 3e) is a creative adaptation related to

the free tram ride campaign celebrating the birthday of Keung To, a member of the popular Canto-pop band Mirror (Figure 3f). This post has received 6796 "likes" and 182 "comments". In addition to Big Waster's image and name, the slogan "低碳生活" [low carbon life] [*dai taan sang wut*] are displayed on the tram.

Here, Big Waster sets an example by sharing that it enjoys traveling around Hong Kong Island by taking tram, highlighting its environmental benefits such as zero carbon emissions and high passenger capacity. Most fans responded positively, expressing their desire to ride the tram with Big Waster, saying it is a refreshing activity that promotes adopting a low-carbon lifestyle, and commenting that the tram in the post looks even better than the original one associated with the pop star. However, there were also negative comments questioning whether simply combining an icon with some text is sufficient to convey the message of environmental protection.

Parodying popular culture is a widely used social media marketing strategy that effectively captures attention by leveraging public interest in the original subject. It allows for easy association, facilitating the transfer of meanings from the endorser to the policies. The three cases mentioned above demonstrate how Big Waster successfully conveyed messages related to environmental protection, no food waste, and carbon-free transportation. By utilizing popular culture references and creative adaptations, important messages can be effectively communicated to a broader audience.

5.3 Stage 3 Post-Endorsement (Action Taking)

The transfer of meanings from policies to the public occurs during the third stage, where the endorser's messages affect individuals' behavior through their perceived need and relevance (Jain and Roy, 2016). By closely examining two sets of posts that encourage environmental protection actions, one could determine if policies have been considered and adopted. Additionally, three posts focused on policy clarification were analyzed, as their purpose was to influence people's actions in alignment with the policies. This comprehensive analysis provides insights into the effectiveness of these communication strategies in driving people's actions.

To promote recycling at the Green@Community Recycling Centre, a post titled "想見你 Recycling Everyday" [Want to see you Recycling Everyday] [*seung gin nei* Recycling Everyday] (Figure 4a) was created, parodying a popular Taiwanese film "*想見你*" [Want to see you] [*seung gin nei*] (Figure 4b). Big Waster, dressed in a ponytail and a skirt, is depicted carrying a plastic bottle and a recycled bag while heading to the recycling center. Echoing the film, the post incorporates emotive language, emphasizing love and not wasting the opportunity to meet. By leveraging Big Waster's popularity, the aim is to motivate people to take action.

In addition to encouraging fans to take actions that support low-carbon living, this cross-social media strategy helped increase the number of followers on Big Waster's Instagram account, which previously had attracted less attention compared to its Facebook account. Most fans responded positively to Big Waster's calls and asked it not to be angry. They shared their own actions, such as using electric fans instead of air conditioners, taking public transport instead of driving, and thinking twice before printing. Some fans also made constructive suggestions, such as the Environmental Protection Department ordering biodegradable cutlery from mainland China to ensure the quality, and restaurants providing borrowable takeaway meal boxes. However, some wrote comments criticizing the strategy of sealing the Instagram account as a form of emotional blackmail, using fear, guilt, or obligation to pressure compliance with a demand. Ultimately, the Facebook posts received 2888 "likes", while the 12 Instagram blocks garnered a total of 3861 "likes". The positive

comments and more than 2500 "likes" indicate that followers intended or have even adopted a low-carbon lifestyle already. Not only did this series of posts help Big Waster's Instagram account gain traction, but it also drove fans to take action towards the goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.
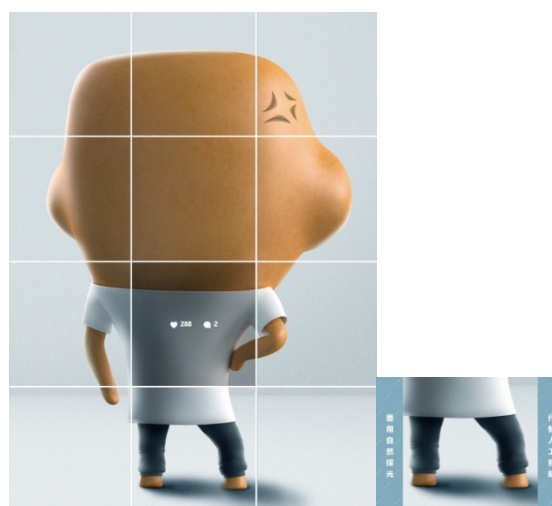

Figure 4. (a) Want to see you Recycling Everyday. **(b)** Taiwanese film "*想見你*" [Want to see you]. **(c)** Remind you I am still angry. **(d)** Each of the 12 blocks provided advice on leading a low carbon life when flipping over like the inset (Big Waster's IG account). * Source: Big Waster's Facebook account. # Source: The Movie Database.

The government has utilized Big Waster's popularity to address controversial issues, as evidenced by the following three examples that garnered numerous "comments" but few "likes" due to the contentious nature of the topics. In the first case, a post showcased the results of four paper spoon strength tests (Figure 5a), which aimed to highlight the advantages of paper spoons amid a plastic ban. However, the post failed to convince people, with some even writing comments saying they turned from love to hate toward Big Waster and considering unfollowing it.

With 3984 likes and 137 comments, this post generated rare exchanges between Big Waster and its fans, as the mascot typically responds infrequently. Fans asked practical questions about the recycling centers, including their locations, operating hours, accepted recyclable items, and how to earn recycling points. These questions were promptly answered, indicating that fans were considering taking action. Some fans even responded that they have already been recycling every week, demonstrating that they had taken action. Alongside these exchanges, there were also witty compliments, such as fans describing Big Waster as "sexy", and some asking if there was a miniature of the mascot available for collection. Big Waster jokingly responded that there would be a badge for fans to wear and to "miss it" too by leveraging the double meaning of the Chinese term, as discussed earlier at the pre-endorsement stage. However, some responses resembled official government statements, such as "Green@Community Recycling Centre has been refreshed as a brand of the community recycling network, which hopes the members of the public can continue to support". This inconsistency in responses is due to the fact that Big Waster is a collaborative effort, with different individuals handling the posts and responses. The EPD has outsourced the production of Big Waster to an external party. While this particular post focused on promoting recycling, the government strategically encourages people to take various actions contributing to carbon neutrality through a series of posts on Big Waster's Facebook and Instagram accounts, as illustrated in the following example.

To encourage the public to take different actions, a narrative was constructed over four days through posts on both Facebook and Instagram accounts. It began with a Facebook post in which Big Waster dreamt of a melting glacier, symbolizing global warming. Big Waster expressed anger as people dismissed the seriousness of the issue, attributing it to just a dream. Following this, another post titled "提返你, Me 仲嬲緊" [Remind you, I am still angry] [*tai faan nei, Me jung nau gan*] (Figure 4c) was made, announcing that Big Waster would seal its Instagram account and turn its back against everyone and it would only change its mind when it accumulated 2050 "likes." This number represents the year Hong Kong aims to achieve carbon neutrality. On the Instagram account, Big Waster's figure was composed of 12 blocks (Figure 4d). Each block provided advice on leading a low-carbon life, which was accessible when fans clicked and flipped it over. Suggestions included using low-carbon public transport, avoiding plastic cutlery and bags, and more.

In addition to encouraging fans to take actions that support low-carbon living, this cross-social media strategy helped increase the number of followers on Big Waster's Instagram account, which previously had attracted less attention compared to its Facebook account. Most fans responded positively to Big Waster's calls and asked it not to be angry. They shared their own actions, such as using electric fans instead of air conditioners, taking public transport instead of driving, and thinking twice before printing. Some fans also made constructive suggestions, such as the Environmental Protection Department ordering biodegradable cutlery from mainland China to ensure the quality, and restaurants providing borrowable takeaway meal boxes. However, some wrote comments criticizing the strategy of sealing the Instagram account as a form of emotional blackmail, using fear, guilt, or obligation to pressure compliance with a demand. Ultimately, the Facebook posts received 2888 "likes", while the 12 Instagram blocks garnered a total of 3861 "likes". The positive

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The government has utilized Big Waster's popularity to address controversial issues, as evidenced by the following three examples that garnered numerous "comments" but few "likes" due to the contentious nature of the topics. In the first case, a post showcased the results of four paper spoon strength tests (Figure 5a), which aimed to highlight the advantages of paper spoons amid a plastic ban. However, the post failed to convince people, with some even writing comments saying they turned from love to hate toward Big Waster and considering unfollowing it.

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 5. (**a**): Paper spoon strength test. (**b**) Clarification for plastic sushi box allowed to be used. (**c**) Food waste processor can digest plastic bags and bone. Source: Big Waster's Facebook account.

Doubts were raised about the credibility of the tests, and users shared user-generated content such as their own videos and photos showcasing problems with paper cutlery. In the second case, following criticism of supermarkets using paper sushi boxes in response to the plastic ban, the government clarified through Big Waster's account that transparent plastic boxes were allowed. The post depicted Big Waster using binoculars to look at sparkling salmon sushi (Figure 5b), which reminds people of a transparent box and the freshness of sashimi for making sushi.

This post generated 639 "comments", the highest among all posts, but Big Waster did not respond. Many criticized the government for "moving the goalpost," accusing it of constantly changing rules to suit the administration's goals. Some questioned whether Big Waster's social media account was the appropriate platform for such kind of clarifications. In the third case, Big Waster posed against a food waste processor (Figure 5c), claiming that the processor can even digest plastic bags and bones, contradicting the government's earlier statement that these items could not be recycled as food waste. It was later discovered that while this type of new processor could process plastic bags and bones, the waste still needs to be treated in a new recycling park after processing.

Fans responded sarcastically, suggesting that this would encourage people to dump all types of waste in the processor, particularly with the upcoming waste charging scheme. These three cases highlight the unwise strategy of using a mascot to promote and clarify unpopular measures. Instead of convincing people to change their minds by leveraging Big Waster's popularity, such posts may even hurt the image of the mascot in people's minds.

6. Discussion

6.1 Ugly Cuteness Enlivens Debate

Big Waster's fandom thrived on its unique blend of ugly cuteness and diverse imagery, bringing a knowing smile to fans' faces. Even when conveying a simple message, like reminding people not to waste food, Big Waster cleverly adopted numerous roles of different genders, ages, and backgrounds to sustain fans' interest. Its timely parodies, often based on popular culture, added to the appeal. However, these eye-catching parodies sometimes caused discussions to stray from the central message. Fans would get caught up in discussions about Big Waster's appearance, leading to humorous tangents that occasionally overshadowed the main purpose. While these lighthearted discussions contributed to the fandom's enjoyment, it is crucial to ensure the primary environmental message remains prominent.

6.2 Popularity May Backfire

A popular social media account associated with the government can become a target for criticism and ridicule due to public resentment towards various issues, ranging from politics to the environment. The government often becomes the subject of mockery on numerous occasions. During the plastic ban, some fans expressed the need to remove "膠官" [plastic officials] [*gaau gun*]. "膠" [Plastic] [*gaau*] in Cantonese means nonsensical thinking, talking, and acting. Homophones are frequently employed to mock the government. For example, one netizen humorously suggested using CCTV to monitor waste disposal, calling it "久觀" [long watch] [*gau gun*], which sounds the same as "狗官" [corrupted officials] [*gau gun*]. Another person referred to the government as "正苦" [really bitter] [*zing fu*], which is the homophone of "政府" [government] [*zing fu*]. Some individuals teased the easily-bent paper cutlery, comparing it to "soft resistance," a term coined by Chinese officials to refer to ideological work aimed at attacking the Hong Kong and Central governments (Hong Kong Free Press,

2023). Sarcastic comments are inevitable, especially when it pertains to controversial policies.

6.3 Mascot Communication Sees Application Limitation

Mascot communication may be limited to promoting social policies relevant to daily life, as the visual element plays an important role. Political policies, particularly national security, are challenging to convey through mascots due to the difficulty of presenting complex ideas. These policies leave no room for ridicule or personal interpretation. While the Big Waster content is produced by an external party, similar outsourcing cannot be applied to promotion of politically sensitive policies, which have no room for ridicule. Additionally, netizens deployed user-generated content such as video of paper cutlery use to criticize the government's measures, but when it comes to political issues, many may dare not to do so, fearing that they may breach the National Security law.

Another limitation of the Big Waster case is that it is confined to communicating with locals. Therefore, the social media platforms used are Facebook and Instagram, which are popular in Hong Kong but banned in mainland China. Additionally, colloquial language, Cantonese, a type of Chinese dialect commonly used by Hongkongers but not most mainland Chinese, is adopted. On the flip side, this is how the local audience finds resonance with Big Waster, making it popular. This essential quality of focusing on the local context also justifies the value of this research, allowing a successful Hong Kong government mascot communication case to shed light on counterparts worldwide.

7. Conclusions and Implications

This research examines the strategic use of mascots as KOLs to promote environmental measures on social media. Analyzing Big Waster's popular social media posts, a three-step strategy was identified using the meaning transfer model.

I.   Pre-endorsement: An anthropomorphic mascot emotionally engages the public, drawing attention and confronting bad habits.
II. Endorsement: Timely parodies of popular culture create resonance, increasing the chances of acceptance.
III. Post-endorsement: Leveraging Big Waster's popularity, people are encouraged to take action.

However, controversial issues pose challenges, as Big Waster's popularity may not convince fans to accept unpopular measures. Such posts could even negatively impact the mascot's image. Thus, mascots, like celebrity KOLs, should not be relied upon for crisis management or clarifications. In summary, mascots can effectively attract attention and promote environmental policies that meet SDGs on social media. However, caution is needed regarding controversial topics, and mascots should not handle crises or clarifications on behalf of the endorsing organization.

By examining the strengths and weaknesses of using mascots for public communication on social media, this study provides a practical contribution. However, the operation and transparency of the government's use of mascots remain unclear. The responsibility for disseminating Hong Kong government's press releases traditionally lies with the Information Services Department but it has outsourced the task of Big Waster's social media communication to external parties. However, the individuals behind the creation of posts and replies, as well as their backgrounds, remain unknown. The responses to fans' messages appear random and incoherent. The nature of the agency involved, its collaboration with the government, and the level of freedom it has in content creation and fan interaction are

undisclosed. Therefore, this study highlights the shortcomings in the government's practice of mascot communication on social media and suggests that transparency should be provided for improvement of the effectiveness of communication.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This research focuses on Big Waster as a widely recognized mascot, but a more comprehensive study could include other government mascots. Big Waster was chosen due to its significant number of fans, their responses, and the timely relevance of environmental and climate issues aligning with SDGs on its social media accounts. However, future studies could compare different government mascots, such as Keep Clean Ambassador Ah Tak from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, which has 48,000 followers on Facebook. Additionally, comparing mascot deployment strategies between Hong Kong public bodies and those of other countries would provide insights into variations in approaches. To enhance the research, conducting interviews with fans could provide a more complete understanding. Exploring the reasons that drive fans to take action or change their behavior after reading social media posts, as well as assessing the longevity of these impacts, would be valuable. The findings of this study can serve as a foundation for future research on a larger scale, aiming to provide reference guidelines for public bodies' utilization of mascot communication on social media.

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Declaration of Interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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