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Twittersphere's reaction to Archer's graduation: A case of an unofficial brand ambassador

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Abstract: The graduation of Archer, the cat from De La Salle University, became a trending topic in Twitter. This study examined the Twitter posts and analyzed the patterns from these series of tweets and retweets. A content analysis was applied on the social media feeds related to the event. Using summative content analysis, the most frequently occurring words are graduation, cats, Archer, DLSU and mascot. The first four words are expected given the context of the event but an analysis of the word “mascot” has shown that Archer is better-suited as a brand ambassador because he humanizes the DLSU brand by presenting the value of education and the vision of finishing university through his graduation ceremony. Although he is an unofficial ambassador, the results from the study can provide insights for organizations to develop their social media engagement strategies beyond mascots and influencers.

Key Words: Twitter, brand ambassador, mascot, content analysis, Archer

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is now regarded by brands as a powerful tool in marketing, leveraging its self-promotion capability as well as inducing user-generated content (Tuten & Perotti, 2019; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Along with its popularity, brands have now learned to “listen” to what the internet is saying by monitoring content and analyzing sentiments expressed by the users (Tuten & Perotti, 2019).

There are several social media platforms, and among them is Twitter. As a microblogging platform, it offers real time information, and the “retweeting” feature offers a powerful mechanism to spread information easily to a new set of audience based on an account’s followers (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). It also offers an avenue where people can publicly discuss thoughts, emotions, and sentiments, so it is well suited for listening in and understanding how a particular topic is discussed

(Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011), whether it is about an event, a brand, a controversy, or any phenomenon that people are talking about. The use of a hash symbol (#) called a hashtag easily archives keywords that are assigned to a particular topic, and its value is derived from the real-time nature of sharing information within Twittersphere (Small, 2010). In addition, Twitter data can be generated from the Application Programming Interface (API) (Reyes & Smith, 2017) thereby giving researchers and brand owners access to rich data of tweets that can be easily analyzed with the aid of a software.

1.1 Brand ambassador vs. brand mascot

In branding literature, the term “ambassador” has been used to identify entities that can further the interest of another entity – and in marketing context, the interest of a brand. The brand ambassador can be an employee, a celebrity, or a customer (Fisher-Buttinger & Vallaster, 2008) that promotes the good image and reputation of the brand.



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On the other hand, a brand mascot, and particularly an anthropomorphic one, are animals or non-living things that are made to resemble humans and possess human-like characteristics to make them more endearing and relatable (Bennett & Thompson, 2016; Belk & Kniazeva, 2018). Brown (2014) argues that there is little understanding on mascot scholarship, but one of the most significant points he made is that some mascots can “take on a life of their own, transcend the brand that bore them, and become part and parcel of popular culture (Brown, 2014, p. 13). There is no agreement as to what a brand mascot is exclusively, and a mascot can also be called a brand icon, spokes-creature, character, or symbol (Brown, 2014).

1.2 Archer’s graduation

For most people, graduation signals the start of a new chapter in their lives. For one cat, it marks his retirement from the campus life. On March 27, 2019, “Archer”, the ginger white cat residing in De La Salle University (DLSU), received a celebration fit for a king – a graduation ceremony to honor his six years of greeting and entertaining DLSU students. The event also formalized his adoption to transition into a more private life in the home of a former DLSU staff that took care of Archer when he was still a kitten.

The graduation ceremony was held within the campus and was attended by over 300 students and visitors. Complete with a stage, a video wall, and a sound system, Archer was presented in his little graduation cap, and videos made by university student media groups were played featuring him and the other cats on campus. It was streamed live via Facebook, and the video racked up over 21,000 views. It also became a trending topic on Twitter, with over 9,000 tweets as of 6:00 pm on that day.

DLSU cats have their own online following. The “Cats of DLSU” Facebook page has over 12,000 followers while the Facebook group “DLSU PUSA” has over 9,000 members. The followers are 62% women, of which 54% are aged 18 to 34, while 33% of the male followers also fall under this age bracket. While the group does not have its own Instagram or Twitter accounts, nor an official hashtag, the DLSU community loves taking snapshots of the cats – while they are sleeping, eating, playing, or derping for the

camera – thus creating their own content in different social media platforms. Also, among the cats in DLSU, Archer is the most popular. He has become the face and the unofficial mascot of DLSU PUSA, and to some degree, a brand ambassador of DLSU itself (Fisher-Buttinger & Vallaster, 2008).

The Cats of DLSU page enjoys a relatively high engagement with its fans. On the days leading to the event and on graduation day, several posts were made on the Facebook page: on March 9, 2019 Archer’s graduation was announced; March 16, 2019, details of graduation and the announcement that the event was open to public was shared; and on March 27, posts about the graduation were highlighted. These online activities created spikes in the engagement, reach, and followers of the page, as seen in Table 1:

Table 1. New Likes, Engagement, and Reach of Cats of DLSU Page

	New Likes	Daily Engagement	Daily Reach
9-day average (prior to graduation-related posts)	3	796	4,011
March 9 (announcement)	485	40,234	175,882
March 16 (event details)	157	8,504	76,895
March 27 (graduation)	144	2,656	9,716
3-day average (post-graduation)	45	2,203	10,343

The event went viral in different social media platforms afterwards, hence sustaining the high engagement and reach post-graduation. It got featured in different local and international news sites and web pages: some notable examples are articles that came out in Philippine Daily Inquirer, Philippine Star, Rappler, Manila Bulletin, ABS-CBN News, GMA7, When in Manila, and the widely popular 9gag. Thus, this study examined the social media feeds that featured Archer on his graduation ceremony and applied content analysis to look into the unstructured text context from Twitter. As an exploratory study, it seeks to understand the views of the general public, as expressed in Twitter posts, and



see how it can contribute to the body of knowledge in marketing on the aspect of being an unofficial brand ambassador. Specifically, the study answered the following questions: What labels were used in the tweets to describe Archer, his graduation, and DLSU? What patterns can be drawn from Archer's graduation, in relation to him being an unofficial brand ambassador of the university?

1.3 Theoretical Lens

This study aims to understand the phenomenon of an unofficial brand ambassador through the lens of Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) (McCracken, 1989). The MTM is a three-stage model that looks into the movement or transfer of meanings – in the case of celebrity endorsers or brand ambassadors, it starts with the meanings associated with the ambassador such as personal characteristics and credibility through the roles they assume in the cultural context (McCracken, 1986) (stage 1), which is then transferred to the meanings associated with a brand (stage 2), and in the last stage, consumed through a purchase activity (stage 3) (Roy, 2018; McCracken, 1989).

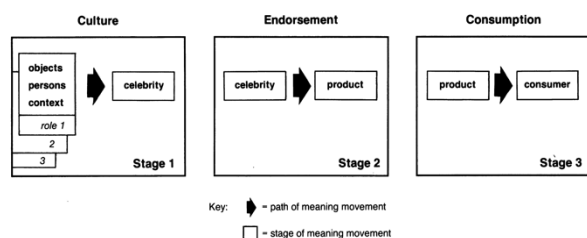


Fig. 1. Meaning Transfer Model (McCracken, 1989)

In the exploratory nature of this research, we seek to understand how the patterns or labels that we have derived from the Twitter posts on Archer's graduation form the endorsement capability of Archer the cat. Although he is an unofficial brand ambassador, his online presence creates associations with De La Salle University, which in turn transfer meanings and possibly influence how people perceive the institution.

2. METHODOLOGY

This unobtrusive qualitative study uses content analysis to examine social media data to

identify patterns and themes taken from Twitter (Lune & Berg, 2017). The event being studied is considered intrinsic because it is an examination of a unique (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and an extreme case (Yin, 2018). Summative content analysis is then done by: (1) collecting tweets related to the event using NCapture, a web browser extension, (2) sorting the data into various categories, (3) counting the frequency of the most used words, and (4) coding the sentiments of the tweets and retweets using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using summative content analysis, the most frequently occurring words from Twitter related to Archer's graduation (Figure 1) are "graduation", "cats", "archer", "dlsu" and "mascot" which are expected given the context of the event. The first two words represent both event and location while the word "archer" represents the name of the cat which is also how students and most athletes in DLSU are called ("Why Green and White? - De La Salle University," n.d.). The university's basketball team members are called "Green Archers". The popularity of the name "Archer" because of the reputation of DLSU in sports makes it easy for people, even outside of the university, to recall the name of the cat. The name mascot follows as the most frequently occurring word from Twitter because brand mascots are ubiquitous and much-loved by consumers (Brown, 2014). However, it should be noted that Archer is not an anthropomorphic brand character like Peter Rabbit, Mickey Mouse, Ronald McDonald, Hello Kitty (Hosany, Prayag, Martin, & Lee, 2013) and even to the hugely popular Jollibee. Although Archers has donned cute outfits like the graduation gown and cap during the event, it still does not ascribe to human characteristics found in most anthropomorphic brand mascots (Bennett & Thompson, 2016).



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