

**Brand Anthropomorphism for Destination Marketing:
The case of Kumamon**

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Certification Page

I, PHUEKSAKORN Waewmanee (Student ID 52115614) hereby declare that the contents of this Master's Thesis are original and true, and have not been submitted at any other university or educational institution for the award of degree or diploma. All the information derived from other published or unpublished sources has been cited and acknowledged appropriately.

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Abstract

In Japan nowadays, the usage of characters and mascots has become more popular. The term '*yuru-kyara*' (laid-back and lovable character) was coined by illustrator and cultural critic Jun Miura in the early 2000s and has been embraced by fans and promoters. Another term is 'anthropomorphism' which refers to animal characters and other non-human objects with humanlike characteristics. These brand characters can be extended to other sub brands to create more awareness of consumer, for instance, by launching and collaborating between business-to-business, or creating the international brand as well (Hosany et al., 2013).

Kumamon, the black bear with circle-shaped red cheeks, is the brand mascot of Kumamoto prefecture. Kumamon can be categorized as one of the '*yurui*' types of anthropomorphic character, has been promoting the prefecture to become well-known internationally. Kumamon acts as the brand and business ambassador of Kumamoto Prefecture government and this character has become the prefecture's signature to establish partnerships with other businesses in the prefecture. Kumamon is crowned as the champion of '*Yuru Kyara Grand Prix*'; the biggest contest for the character mascot in Japan. Moreover, in the following year, Kumamon earned 11.8 billion Yen or US\$120 million, his status changed into a Japanese celebrity. Kumamon began to go abroad and became business partner in Asian countries, including Thailand. Kumamon has evolved from a local anthropomorphic brand to an

international brand that is popular in Thailand. After Kumamon several visits, the collaboration between Kumamoto prefecture and Thai businesses happened because of the increased awareness of Kumamon in Thailand.

This study aims to analyze Kumamon's popularity in Thailand and how it impacts fans' intention to visit Kumamoto. Unlike other anthropomorphic brands, Kumamon has no licensing fee. The main objective of Kumamon is to promote the Kumamoto prefecture, its origin. Hence, this study will focus on identifying the factors that drive fans' intention to visit Kumamoto. The findings of this study will contribute to the understanding of anthropomorphic brands' effectiveness for destination marketing and will provide implications for the effective usage of anthropomorphic brands.

This study use quantitative research method using survey that was distributed to Kumamon Thai fans which amounted to 217 respondents. For the validity and reliability check, both Pearson's Correlation analysis and Cronbach's Alpha were conducted and path analysis using the Structural Equation Modeling was constructed with SPSS AMOS data analysis software. There are two exogenous variables (Anthropomorphism, Self-Brand Congruity) and three endogenous variables (Positive Emotional Connection, Fan Community Engagement and Fan Intention).

The findings of this study show that the entire path analysis model using these variables have high significant level ($P < 0.01$) hence, all the hypotheses in this research are fully accepted. Moreover, all of the outcomes of this study show positive correlations in each of the measurement. For the study of destination marketing, to increase the fans' intention, the model highly recommends creating the positive emotional connection to the anthropomorphic brand as it has the highest standardized total effect value. Also, in this model positive emotional connection is heavily influenced by anthropomorphism. Thus, anthropomorphism play a very important role on increasing fans' intention. The developed fan intention model in this research serves to advance the research of destination marketing by consider the impact of Anthropomorphism, Self-Brand Congruity, Fan Community Engagement, and Positive Emotional Connection to the Fans Intention with the case of Kumamon of Kumamoto Prefecture.

Introduction

'Anthropomorphism' refers to animal characters and other non-human objects with humanlike characteristics. These characters could create brand awareness and increase the effectiveness of advertising. The storyline, personality, and appearance of the character are mostly related to the local community, culture of origin, or that organization. Brand characters can be categorized into three broad typologies: in animation (e.g. Mickey Mouse), with identity (e.g. Michelin Man), and in pure design (e.g. Hello Kitty). Moreover, there is one example strategy that these brand characters can be extended to other sub-brands to create more awareness of consumer, for instance, launching and collaborate between business-to-business or creating the international brand as well (Hosany et al., 2013).

In Japan nowadays, the usage of characters and mascots has become more popular. The term *'yuru-kyara'* was coined by illustrator and cultural critic Jun Miura in the early 2000s, and despite the negative connotations, the title has been embraced by fans and promoters. Miura has stated that there are three main requirements that make a *yuru-kyara* which are: 1) it must convey a strong message of love for one's hometown or local region, 2) the character's movements or behavior should be unique and unstable or awkward, 3) the character should be unsophisticated or laid-back (*yurui*) and lovable.

These *yuru-kyara* characters have been designed for promoting local communities, events, local goods and so on. *Yuru-kyara* also reaches out to the public and communicates to them through social media as well as public events such as sports and games organized by the local governments to help increase the awareness and establish the relationship between the public and the respective *yuru-kyara* (Suzuki, 2012).

Kumamon, the brand mascot of Kumamoto which can be categorized as one of the ‘*yurui*’ type of anthropomorphic character, has been promoting the prefecture to become well-known internationally. Kumamon acts as the brand and business ambassador of Kumamoto Prefecture government and this character has become the ambassador and prefecture’s signature to establish partnerships to other businesses among the prefecture. By the uniqueness of the character itself and pushing the mascot’s awareness in the mass market, Kumamoto prefecture uses this ‘*yuru-kyara*’ method to become successful in the local tourism and also affects the national economics. In 2011, one year of after Kumamon’s distribution in Japan, Kumamon is crowned as the champion of ‘*Yuru Kyara Grand Prix*’; the biggest contest for the character mascot in Japan. Moreover, on the following year, Kumamon earned 11.8 billion Yen or US\$120 million, his status changed into Japanese celebrity (The Asahi Shimbun, 2016). He began to go abroad and became business partner in Asian countries, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and

Thailand.

One of the countries in Asia that Kumamon approached as an international brand is Thailand. Nowadays, people in Thailand visit Japan more frequently because no visa is needed to enter Japan. The awareness of Kumamon itself has been spreading all in the headlines and also the social media. Kumamon is not only a regular anthropomorphic brand character, mascot, or *yuru-kyara* anymore, but Kumamon has evolved as a popular international brand among Thai fans. The case of Kumamon in Thailand will be used as a case study to investigate the fan behavior of Kumamon more importantly to analyze the Thai fans' intention to visit Kumamoto prefecture.

Exploring how a local anthropomorphic brand like Kumamon grows in Thailand and knowing the Kumamon fans' behavior in Thailand will provide insights on how Japanese local anthropomorphic has been perceived in non-Japanese markets. Moreover, Kumamon is one of the Japanese anthropomorphic brand that has no licensing fee unlike other brand characters which main purpose is to gain profit. The main aim of Kumamon, however, is to promote the brand origin which is the Kumamoto prefecture. Indeed, the Research Institute of Economy and Trade in Japan has published an article highlighting the need of strengthening the brand strategy for Kumamon to further increase its value locally and globally (Naruo Masataka, 2014)

This study draws upon the literature of celebrity endorsement and sports fan marketing in order to identify the factors that drive fans' intention to visit the origin of an anthropomorphic brand. For the previous literature, there are many studies about sport fans marketing using the brand mascot. However, this study in particular examined the destination marketing using the anthropomorphism brand. The main objective of this research is to identify the factors or conditions that raise Kumamon fans' intention to visit Kumamoto, and to answer *'How brand anthropomorphism as the methodology of destination marketing can positively impact the intention to visit brand's origin?'* This research will be conducted empirically where fan intention will be set as the main dependent variable, and fans' behavior variables which are anthropomorphism, self-brand congruity, positive emotional connection, and fan community engagement will be included as well in the model. By analyzing the Kumamon fans' behavior in Thailand, the results are hoped to be able to be generalized for other local anthropomorphic brand, especially the relationship of factors between the fans' behavior and their intention to visit the promoted place.

Background

1. Yuru-Kyara

The trademark ‘Yuru-kyara’ by FUSOSHA Publishing Inc. and Miura Jun has become one of the phenomena in the Japanese society. Yuru-kyara has been used for the community branding in the early 20th century. The yuru-kyara mascot has designed to promote local communities, events, local goods and so on. Many prefectures in Japan use these prefecture mascots to promote annual national sports game as well as the prefecture themselves. Many local prefectural governments in Japan try to raise the awareness of the local places promotion using these humorous characters to attract more tourists and increase the economic value to the prefecture. Nowadays, Yuru-kyara in Japan has become one of the business trends in Japan that could be processed via media. This process is called CGM, or consumer-generated media, which oversees fans’ work or creators’ work on the creation of yuru-kyara therefore, to be in the exhibition, competition and be able to release their new work through the market (Arakawa Ryu, 2009).

The number of Yuru-kyara, or humorous mascots, in Japan increases year by year. Thus, in 2010, the first Yuru-kyara Grand Prix was held by Yuru Character® Grand Prix Executive Committee Special Cooperation of Fusosha. It was the biggest competition for Yuru-kyara in Japan. Citizens of Japan will vote for the winner of the

Yuru-kyara Grand Prix and the judgement will be considered from the three main points which are 1.) Enhance the local area; the character that has the most participation of municipalities, shopping districts, and local tourism association. 2.) Enhance the company; a character of a private company and contributes to regional activities. 3.) Enhance Japan; a character that is doing their best to appeal Japan. The Grand Prix had started from 348 character participants in 2011 and increasing to 1,421 character participants in 2016. This surge in numbers suggests that the usage of Yuru-kyara in Japan has become more prominent where participating characters also started to expand internationally. This overseas yuru-kyara expansion has also impacted the culture to other countries with increasing awareness of foreigner tourists as well.

2. Kumamon

Kumamon is one of the most famous Yuru-kyara in Japan. He has been voted for number 1 ranking of the nation Yuru-kyara Grand Prix 2011 and reached the celebrity status in the same year. Initially, Kumamon was aimed to promote a campaign to draw tourists to the Kumamoto prefecture after the Kyushu Shinkansen line opened. Currently, he is the ambassador and mascot of Kumamoto prefecture. Kumamon has become well-known by his humorous and unique characteristics. Mr. Manabu Mizuno, the creator of

Kumamon has influenced the character to become more than a mascot but also created awareness of tourists who travel to Kumamoto prefecture. The awareness of this character has been increasing and expanding over time to fans all over Japan and eventually outside Japan as well. Kumamon's started to gain international reputation in 2013, he started to promote Kumamoto Prefecture abroad in Taiwan for the first time. A year later, Kumamon continued his international exposure by going to Paris and London for Japan Expo 2014. The evolution process of Kumamon from a local yuru-kyara until his international expansion is summarized briefly in Table 1.

Table 1: Kumamon's Activity Timeline

Year	Activities
2007	Starting Point: promote at a local event to increase local tourists.
2008	Yuru Kyara Festival, attended some international conventions in Japan.
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1st Commencement of <u>Yuru-kyara</u> Grand Prix (Public Voting) - Distribution of Kumamon (to promote for a campaign called to draw tourists to the region after the Kyushu Shinkansen line opened).
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Official Kumamon's birth year. - Kumamon became No.1 for <u>Yuru-kyara</u> Grand Prix 2011. - Kumamon earned ¥2.5 billion (US\$26 million, GB£17 million, €20 million).
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kumamon earned ¥11.8 billion (US\$120 million, GB£79 million, €93 million).
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kumamon started go abroad (Taiwan).
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kumamon joined Japan Expo in Europe (Paris and London).

	- Collaborated in an animation movie.
2015	- Kumamon joined Japan Expo in Thailand. - Signed MOU with I.C.C. International Co., Ltd. - Kumamoto Prefecture opened an office in Hong Kong. - Kumamon Café was opened in Hong Kong.
2016	- Kumamon visited Thailand for the second time.
2017	- Opened Kumamon Café in Shanghai. - Kumamon Fans Thanksgiving Party 2017 in Bangkok (Thailand).

Kumamon is non-licensing mascot, which means that Kumamoto Prefecture allows other companies or organizations to use Kumamon's images without any financial obligations. Only applications and memorandum of understanding (MOU) are required for any institutions to be able to use Kumamon's materials. Product manufacturers, retailers and other interested companies may use Kumamon as a part of their product, branding or promotion as long as they mentioned that Kumamon is from Kumamoto Prefecture to endorse the place of origin and increase the consumer awareness to Kumamoto Prefecture (The Wall Street Journal, 2013). Especially after the Kumamoto Earthquake in 2016, Kumamon lifted up the victims using his lively and humorous characteristics to brought joy to them. Kumamon has also been working hard to live up for his reputation. For instance, Kumamon helped promoting the discount tours to Kyushu campaign in 2016 to recover from the quake damage by increasing the number of tourists

during August 2016. As the result, reservation number rapidly grew, claimed by travel agencies and hotels that worked together with the Kumamoto Prefecture government (Japan Times, 2016).

3. I.C.C. International Public Company Limited

INTERNATIONAL COSMETICS CO LTD or I.C.C. International brought Kumamon to Thailand in 2015 and has created the Kumamon's awareness to Thai fans. The company has the full rights of memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Kumamoto prefecture government with the loyalty fee in Thailand. There are three main points in the MOU which are Public Relations, Collaborations and Producing Products of Kumamon. In Thailand, I.C.C manages the whole image of Kumamon in Thailand as well as collaborating between companies that would like to use Kumamon in their project with Kumamoto Prefecture. Since Kumamon was created to be the tourism ambassador or mascot of Kumamoto Prefecture, signing MOU between I.C.C. and Kumamoto Prefecture also accomplished one of the purposes of Kumamoto Prefecture to increase awareness and intention of Thai tourists to visit Kumamoto Prefecture.

I.C.C.'s choice of Kumamon as the first anthropomorphic brand to be marketed

was not a mistake. Nowadays, Kumamon is booming and becoming quite popular in Thailand. Previously, from Japan, only Sanrio character brand was recognized by the market. Right now, more yuru-kyara can be found in department store's section in Thailand. Also, more organizations are using anthropomorphic or brand characters to create awareness among Thai people. This suggests that the Thai market is readier to accept anthropomorphic brand as character merchandising market size is gradually enlarging.

The reason why I.C.C. decided to choose Kumamon to be marketed in Thailand is because of the uniqueness of the character itself that suites Thai people's personality. Compared to other commercialized characters such as Disney or Sanrio, Kumamon has a distinct differentiation in the market. Some character has a lot of feminism element that suits only for females, but Kumamon is a more general unisex character which could have larger market, not only niche like other characters. Kumamon also has a lively image and his own unique behavior. He has his own characteristics and story behind his creation. These anthropomorphic elements made Kumamon activities unique and become outstanding among other existing characters.

In the long term, I.C.C.'s mission is to develop a holistic business based on this

anthropomorphic brand, for instance, by developing the brand into other business units such as café or hostel. This aligns with the main aim of Kumamon which is to create sustainability awareness of Kumamon and more importantly to develop Kumamoto Prefecture's prospect as one of the top destinations for Thai tourists.

As the agency in Thailand, I.C.C. is working together with Kumamoto Prefecture to increasing the intention to visit the prefecture more by creating the public relation campaign, collaboration projects with other agency in Thailand and producing anthropomorphic merchandise. I.C.C. believes that by placing Kumamoto Prefecture's famous tourist attractions, such as Kumamoto Castle or Mount Aso, tourists will have increasing market awareness towards Kumamoto Prefecture and ultimately will increase the number of tourists to Kumamoto Prefecture. Therefore, I.C.C. has the vital role for marketing Kumamon in Thailand by gathering Kumamon Thai fans together with methods such as creating events that engage fans activities, expanding the Kumamon official shop branches and publishing online services for fans.

Literature Review

1. Destination Marketing

Destination marketing is one of the concept or strategy to develop promotion and local region's performances to attract tourists, visitors to the specific location. This is closely tied with the main mission of Kumamon which is to market Kumamoto Prefecture as the destination. The marketing strategy that is responsible for the tourism promotions by attracting visitors to the promoted place refers as Destination Management Organizations, or in short, DMOs. Pearce (1992) defines the tourist destination itself as the geographical area that attracts tourists. Tourists would be able to visit and enjoy the destination by their availability of products and services (Buhalis, 2000). This is achieved when tourists or visitors can buy and consume products, services and experiences by visiting the local area which includes hotels, restaurants, shops, museums, theme parks and local souvenirs. The local region or destination itself could be referred as a brand which contributed the image of the whole location.

In addition, Buhalis (2000) also has explained the strategic destination planning model in his previous studies. The strategic destination planning process has involved many parties such as local organizations, stakeholders and several scholars. All parties would work cooperatively during the DMOs process to set good relationships and achieve

many tasks that would lead to the location's goal. The destination marketing plan can be considered as the most effective way to reflect the marketing direction that might involve the regional tourism plan, the product region development and plans of adjoining regions or special interest groups, such as the gourmet food groups etc. (Vengesayi, S., 2003). The destination marketing will constantly be improved and driven by tourists' demands, where each destination will create plans and strategies to optimize their offers for tourists who interested in the destination.

In this study, Kumamoto Prefecture has been using the anthropomorphism brand character or '*yuru-kyara*' methodology embodied by Kumamon, to attract tourists from all around the world to know more Kumamoto Prefecture. The collaboration between Kumamon and other organizations in Japan and overseas has been increasing year by year to promote the destination among visitors. For example, in 2017, China Airlines launched regular flight between Kaohsiung (Taiwan) and Kumamoto Prefecture. Kumamon's image and goods also decorates the flight to promote the uniqueness of this new route. Kumamon is the first mascot to have his own featured plane with international route. This campaign is run promote both destination, Kaohsiung and Kumamoto, to become more well-known and to become an alternative choice of destination among foreigner tourists (Focus Taiwan NEWS Channel, 2017).

2. Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of non-human agent and human like feature objects that inspire such thinking and resemble of human faces, such as humanlike intentions, motivations, characteristics or emotions (Epley et al, 2007). Anthropomorphism can also be referred as a psychological phenomenon, where it could lead into anthropomorphic thinking, which is when individuals perceive product brand and other objects as having humanlike characteristics (Waytz et al, 2010). Therefore, a product could be said as having an anthropomorphic characteristic when it can be perceived to have humanlike attributes embedded into it (Epley et al, 2007).

Brand anthropomorphism gives a positive impact to the consumer when it has successfully been perceived as an actual human being. McGill (2007) argues that consumers perceive anthropomorphic products more positively compared to the ones that do not have any anthropomorphic design representations. In other source of literature by Chandler and Schwarz (2010), using anthropomorphic brand in the product has proved to have a significant increase in customer's purchase intention compared to the same product without any anthropomorphic brand associations.

In anthropomorphism itself, there are three main typologies of brand characters:

1.) *Brand characters in animation*: the anthropomorphic brand characters with rich storyline and typically accompanied by other supporting characters as the background.

This typology is created to fit with consumer's personal brand scape and culture. In this typology, it typically utilizes advanced technologies to enrich the graphical form of the character (Callcott & Lee, 1994).

2.) *Brand characters with identity*: also could refer as 'spokes-characters' or nonhuman characters that promote a product, brand, service, or idea to enhance consumer trust, resulting in positive brand attitude (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004; B. J. Phillips and Lee, 2005).

3.) *Brand character with pure design*: the anthropomorphic brand character with relatively simple background stories, relying on their design and style to appeal to consumer. In this typology, most characters will rely on merchandise sales and licensing fee to generate revenue (Meyer, 2010).

The case study in this research, Kumamon, was initially created with the main intention to promote Kumamoto prefecture. Therefore, even though some literatures have explained about the concept of anthropomorphism and their typologies, Kumamon may not be simply assigned to one of these three typologies. From the abovementioned three

typologies, Kumamon may be more easily associated with the second typology or the brand character with identity, because he was designed to be the mascot to promote the place. However, Kumamon promotes Kumamoto Prefecture, not the physical product with brand or provide the services. Kumamon also have some correlations with the third typology or the brand character with pure design. This again, contradicts with the business model of Kumamon since Kumamon is a non-licensing brand character which will not rely on merchandise and licensing fee to generate the revenue. Thus unlike previous brand characters, Kumamon is a hybrid typology that adds the originality of this research.

Previous literatures have established the positive connection of anthropomorphism brand to purchase intention of the product or services. However, whether this positive connection also carries on when the purchase intention changed to fan intention for destination marketing is open to questions. This research also would like to add further information regarding the existence of significant connection between anthropomorphism and positive emotional connection, which information is very scarce as well in the literature pool of destination marketing and anthropomorphism brand.

3. Self-Brand Congruity

Homophily refers as the state of being monophyletic or shared descent from a common ancestor, or can simply be said as the tendency of individuals to associate and

bond themselves other entities that have strong similarities. In this literature pool, over a hundred studies that have observed homophily in some form or another and it has been established that similarity breeds connection (McPherson, M. et al, 2001). Individuals in homophilic relationship that share common characteristics such as beliefs, values, or education make communication and relationship formation easier.

In the marketing world, this term refers as self-congruence which is when customers thought and believed that a brand has a feeling that fits or have similarity with the customers' personality. Therefore self-brand congruity is associated with the resonance of the brand with the customer's emotional value where they can feel very close to the brand because of the similarity and sees the brand equal to a person to the point that customers can think: 'that brand is a person like me' (Sirgy, 1982). For instance, consumers found themselves matching their personality with the brand and reflect themselves through the brand. In the way of homophily, these consumers also create the reaction to other person as well which has become one of the relationship between consumers and brand. There are some relevant factors between self-congruence and homophily where brand has become some sense to consumers. Therefore, with self-brand congruence customers can tell that the brand resonates with their personality or even could also lead to the idea that 'the brand is a person different from me' (cf., Malar et al,

2011).

The relationship between consumers and the brand image is when both concepts connect and construct to each other (Sirgy, 1982). When the consumers see that the brand has matched with their self-concept, this term is called 'self-congruity'. The more consumers feel connected to the brand, the higher self-congruity level is. Therefore, it is most likely to create positive attitude toward the brand (Parker, 2009). When consumer feels connected or perceive that there is a match between self-concept and the brand image it also creates a positive attitude toward brand that would lead to more favorable brand loyalty as well.

Self-brand congruity is included in this research model, pairing with the anthropomorphism brand to further explore the relationship with the positive emotional connection as well as the fan community engagement, ultimately discovering whether self-brand congruity is one of the factors that could affect the fan intention to visit the promoted place or not.

4. Positive Emotional Connection

Emotional connection refers as the strong emotional feeling towards the loving brand (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). From the consumers' point of view, positive emotional connection could also refer as the strong desire on the favorable or the love

object, where consumers' feeling of bond and attachment to the loving brand has become irreplaceable. The love towards the brand becomes one of the unique drivers that influence consumers' emotional desire (Hazan and Zeifman 1999; Park et al. 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005).

Positive emotional connection could be attributing to consumers' experiences towards the brand. There are three aspects of the positive emotional connection towards the brand, which are: 1) the sense of 'rightness' or the right fit between consumer and the favorite brand, 2) when thinking or using the favorite brand will lead consumer to the positive effect and 3) consumer has the emotional attachment to the favorite brand (Philipp A. et al, 2014).

Some literature also has divided the positive emotional connection as the sense that affects the feeling of consumers which are more associated with psychological studies. There are also three indicators or measurements of this positive emotional connection:

- 1.) *Intuitive Fit*: It's psychologically comfortable to use the object or brand, meets consumer's needs perfectly, natural fit, fits tastes perfectly, felt right when first encountered it, now feels right, strength of feeling of liking, etc.
- 2.) *Emotional Attachment*: It feels like old friend, emotionally connected, feel there is a

bond between the consumers and the brand, etc.

3.) *Positive Effect*: It feels more content, relaxing, fun, exciting, calming, pleasurable, etc.

Positive emotional connection to consumer could also be created by the brand's story or specific demographic from the marketing perspective. When the brand has its own story, the brand is able to bond to the customers by creating unique experiences. Thus, this positive consumer experience plays an important role to develop strong relationship between the brands (Gregory, 2013). The impact of positive emotional connection between fans and brands has become one of the factors that could drive willingness or intention of the consuming behavior. Most of the brands create this rhythm of positive emotional connection to the brand to increase the momentum of trust and strong relationship of the consumers. To create a positive emotional connection to the brand, the brand's message, activities and image should support and should be integrated to each other (Kervyn, 2012).

As one of Japan's most prominent anthropomorphic brand, Kumamon has strong character and story by showing the fans how the character has become the main mascot to promote Kumamoto Prefecture. During the promotion activities, Kumamon shows his ability and personality through his humorous interactions with fans. This

anthropomorphism brand behaviors may boost the emotional connection between Kumamon and the fans, which this research aims to establish. This will be proven in the hypothesis testing part where the relationship between positive emotional connection and other aspects such as anthropomorphism, self-brand congruity, and fan community engagement will be tested for significance. Eventually, all these factors will lead into better understanding of the fan intention to visit Kumamoto.

5. Fan Community Engagement

The concept of fan community engagement lies on the relationship between fans with the feeling of friendship and companionship toward each other. Other marketing term of this phenomenon is brand community identification, or when the consumer of the brand community has the intensive connection between other brand community members (Keller, 2003). This intensive connection and strong sense of belonging also means that the sense of difference from others who are not in the brand community exists (Keller, 2003; Muniz&O’Cuinn, 2001). In brand community, the degree of commitment to the community tends to have high or strong. This is on a different level with the fan community, it is more to be diverse group of people and it varies between high to low degrees of commitment to the community.

During the literature review, many literatures have portrayed the intensity of fan

community engagement in sport fan communities. Some behaviors that could positively indicate this commitment is for example the loyalty engagement of sport fans, the support displayed by the sports fans, the collaborative event attendance, and sharing fond experiences with other fellow fans. This aspect is supplemented in this research as literatures regarding the fan community engagement for anthropomorphic brand are very rare. Kumamon as brand celebrity has many fans in Thailand where some of the most loyal fans joined the Kumamon VIP Member Club. This is similar to sports fan behavior, implying that Kumamon fans community is also engaged in the similar kind of behavior. In this sense, it might be that the conceptualization of sport fans communities can be adapted to anthropomorphic brand fan communities where more intensive fan community engagement could result in the increase of fan intention towards visiting the promoted place, which in this case is Kumamoto Prefecture.

Hypothesis

From all the literature review, now it can be understand from the previous studies about Anthropomorphism. However, it effects to other variables are yet to be established. As the self-brand congruity is a reflection of a customer's emotional value from a brand

and anthropomorphism carries a strong emotional implication. This research proposed the first hypothesis:

H1 Anthropomorphism is positively related to self-brand congruity.

Anthropomorphism which is defined as human like characteristic of the brand could bring the life in the brand itself. Thus, may invoke the customer's emotional connection. It can be assume that positive anthropomorphism behavior could result in positive emotional connection as well. Therefore, the second hypothesis proposed is:

H2 Anthropomorphism is positively related to positive emotional connection to the anthropomorphic brand.

Aside from affecting personal values, brand anthropomorphism can also impacts customer's social values which are the sense of belonging and the engagement of the Fan community of the brand itself. Previous studies had researched the social value of the sport fan community engagement but not related with brand anthropomorphism. Hence, It is interesting to see the social values of brand anthropomorphism that effects to the fan community engagement which brings to the third hypothesis:

H3 Anthropomorphism is positively related to fan community engagement.

Next, when self-brand congruity that is the reflection of the brand to the customer's self is perceived positively, it may also result in positive emotional connection between customer and the brand. Moreover, this self-brand congruity could also impact the social value of the customer to be engaged with other communities as they have their own idea of the brand congruity which brings the fourth hypotheses:

H4a. Self-brand congruity is positively related to positive emotional connection.

H4b. Self-brand congruity is positively related to fan community engagement.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the destination marketing literature by establishing the significant effect from brand anthropomorphism through positive emotional connection and brand anthropomorphism through fan community engagement. This study identifies the characteristic of brand mascot and the effect to the fans' intention to visit the promoted place is expected to be positively affected by these two endogenous variables: Positive emotional connection and Fan community engagement. Therefore, the fifth hypotheses are:

H5a. Positive emotional connection is positively associated with fans' intention to visit the anthropomorphic brand's origin.

H5b. Fan community engagement is positively associated with fans' intention to visit the anthropomorphic brand's origin.

Moreover, by comparing the measurement result of the positive effect of these two variables, the most prominent affecting variable can be identified. The outcome of this study using the proposed hypothesis model is not only to establish the significant positive effect of the variables but also the effectiveness of each using the method that will be elaborated in the later chapter.

Conceptualization

Based on the hypotheses above that derived from the literature reviews, this research proposed the following conceptualization:

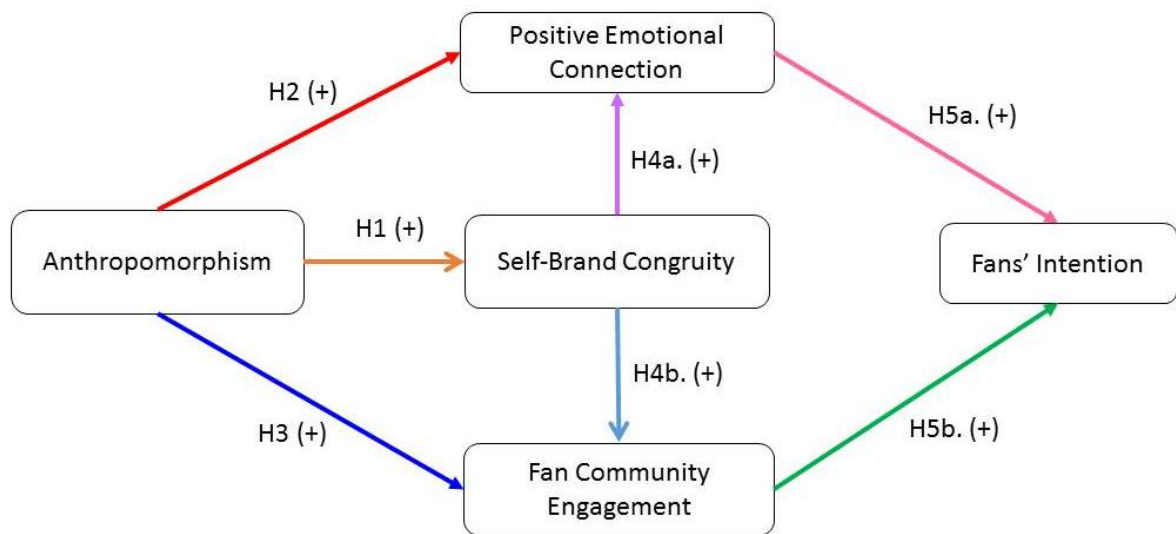


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

This conceptual framework contains five variables for the three main research hypotheses. In each of the arrows, it is hypothesized that positive correlation relationship is significantly present between the variables which finally contributes to discover the determinants of the main exogenous variable which is the fan intention. Moreover, the strength of relationships would be measured to further determine the most significant variable in the model that positively affects the intention to visit the place of origin of the brand anthropomorphism. In detail, this research conceptualization aims to establish the

following relationships.

1. *The Impact of Anthropomorphism*

In the case study, Kumamon's anthropomorphism would be measured on how Kumamon Thai fans who are attached to this anthropomorphism brand from Kumamoto Prefecture perceive Kumamon as an object with the humanlike intentions, motivations, characteristics and emotions (Epley et al, 2007). Anthropomorphism will be measured as an exogenous variable, where the impact of the anthropomorphism would be tested in relation to fan's self-brand congruity, positive emotional connection and fan community engagement as Hypothesis 1, 2 and 3.

2. *The Impact of Self-brand Congruity*

In addition, the concept of self-brand congruity which is the concept that related to fans that associated with relationship or become partner of the brand and that brand could be equally to a person or so to speak 'that brand is a person like me' (Sirgy, 1982). In the study which the survey has been constructed to measure fan's relationship between themselves and Kumamon's image is when both concepts connect and construct to each other (Sirgy, 1982). In Hypothesis 4 (H4a.) and (H4b.), the positive impact of self-brand congruity that related to positive emotional connection and fan community engagement would be tested for significance.

3. The Impact of Positive Emotional Connection

The concept of positive emotional connection would be test in Hypothesis 5a (H5a). Since positive emotional connection is hypothesized to be a strong psychological drive for fans to have the intention to do something that they like. Therefore, this concept will be relatively connected to other measurements as well. For instance, positive emotional connection might be positively associated with fans intention to visit the anthropomorphic brand's origin.

4. The Impact of Fan Community Engagement

From the literature review, it could be understood that fans that have strong relationship or companionship towards the brand and members would have higher commitment and loyalty to the brand. In this case, Kumamon fans in Thailand also attend many events and activities which also included in the concept of fan community engagement. They join the event to share and show the commitment or their love towards Kumamon. In Hypothesis 5b (H5b), the positive relationship of fan community engagement and other concepts would be tested for significance. The results are expected to explain which concept has the strongest positive connection and leads to the fans intention to visit the brand anthropomorphism's origin place.

Research Methodology

1. Interview with I.C.C. International

An interview was conducted with I.C.C International in Thailand, which is the company that has the full rights of memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Kumamoto Prefecture government. The interview with I.C.C international provided a better and deeper understanding of the vital role of marketing Kumamon in Thailand to create Kumamon Thai fans, such as organizing fans activities, expanding the Kumamon official shop branches, and publishing online services for fans.

I.C.C.'s Brand Manager, Ms. Brinda Bunapapong, provided a clear understanding about the company and the business collaboration with Kumamoto Prefecture. At first, I.C.C. has one vision and the prefectural government has another vision. Ms. Brinda explained the process of how the agreement was found in between both sides which creates a new type of business. More importantly, this interview result has contributed significantly on insights regarding the trend of Kumamon and other anthropomorphism brand in Thailand. From this interview, deeper information regarding the back story and the business model of Kumamon has helped enriching the literature as well as finalizing the design of the questionnaire.

2. Survey

Quantitative research method using survey was conducted to analyze the relationship between the variables depicted in the research conceptualization. As Kumamon is used as the case study for the research, the procedure of the survey was done by distributing to Kumamon Thai Fans during the four days of '*Kumamon Fans Thanksgiving Party in Thailand 2017*' event (22nd March 2017 to 25th March 2017). This event was held by I.C.C International at Siam Paragon, Bangkok, which allows fans to meet with Kumamon. The event included stage shows, Kumamon's official goods shop, and meet-and-greet with Kumamon as well.

Kumamon fans in Thailand have a strong consistently relationship between themselves and the anthropomorphic brand. This can be seen from the observation during the "Kumamon Fans Thanksgiving Party in Thailand 2017" event in Bangkok; many of Thai fans were willing to attend this event everyday despite the event was held in four days. With the aim of promoting Kumamoto Prefecture using the anthropomorphic brand of Kumamon, this event also gave the Thai fans a chance to meet Kumamon in person by buying Kumamon's merchandise that is prepared by I.C.C. By purchasing the products in this event, fans would be able to individually take photo with Kumamon and do many activities together. Here, fans are seen to be very willing

to spend a lot of money to get a chance to be closer to their beloved anthropomorphic brand. In this case, fans who purchased 800THB (23USD) would have a chance to win the lucky draw with the prize of taking picture individually with Kumamon, and fans who purchased Kumamon Doll costing around 1,600THB (46USD) would be eligible to directly join the photo session and attend meet-and-greet event with Kumamon. Every day, I.C.C. has limited the number of slots for these opportunities. However, due to high demand from the fan, all three days were fully reserved. From this observation, in case Kumamon's Thai fans, high purchasing power driven by the love of anthropomorphic brand Kumamon seems to be present.

The questionnaire design has two main parts: one for basic information questions of the respondents and another part for the main research questions which divided into six main parts as the six main measurements using Likert Scale for this study. In total, the number of the questions is 25 questions. Since the survey was created for Thai fans as a focus group, Thai has been used as the language of the survey during the data collection process. I.C.C. was cooperating as well and direct distribution to the fans who attended the event for four days were allowed. Doing face-to-face data collecting allowed to more in-depth information to be received by observing the Kumamon fans during answering the questionnaire.

In total, the survey was distributed to 221 fans. However, 4 of the questionnaires were not valid because of incomplete answers thus was excluded from the data analysis. The remaining 217 questionnaires were deemed valid and were usable for further analysis. Six main variables that will be analyzed from this questionnaire were anthropomorphism, self-brand congruity, positive emotional connection, fan community engagement, and finally fan intention.

3. Back Translation

Originally, the survey was designed in English. Since the focus group of the respondents was the Kumamon's fan base in Thailand, hence, it has been translated into Thai to increase the understandability level for Thai respondents. To ensure the accuracy of the meaning and translation, native Thai citizen was asked to assess the differences in the meaning between the original and translated documents. Back translation was also done to ensure that both the English version and the Thai version on the survey have the same meaning. After several improvements, the Thai version of the survey was distributed to Kumamon fans in Thailand.

4. Measurement

There are six main measurements to be measured using Likert Scale in the survey design that was distributed to Kumamon fans in Thailand, which are:

1. *Anthropomorphism*, focusing on how fans in Thailand see the image of Kumamon as one anthropomorphic character whether he has his own mind, intention and emotional experience or not.
2. *Self-brand Congruity*, focusing on how fans see themselves with Kumamon brand. They has the core relation of their image and congruent with or not.
3. *Brand Quality*, focusing on how fan evaluate the brand itself.
4. *Fan Community Engagement*, focusing on fans behavior, activities and communities.
5. *Positive Emotional Connection*, focusing on fans emotional connection with Kumamon.
6. *Fan's intention*, focusing on their intention to visit Kumamon in Kumamoto prefecture.

From these six measurements, each of the measurements has three questions which are shown in the following table.

Table 2 Measurements and Questions

Measurements and Questions	
<i>Measurement #1 Anthropomorphism (Modified from Hart, 2013)</i>	
A1	To what extent does Kumamon seem to have a mind of its own?
A2	To what extent does Kumamon seem to have intentions?
A3	To what extent does Kumamon seem to experience emotions?
<i>Measurement #2 Self-Brand Congruity (Modified from Guido and Peluso, 2014)</i>	
BC1	Kumamon is congruent with the image I hold of myself.
BC2	Kumamon is congruent with the image I would like to hold of myself.
BC3	Kumamon is congruent with the image I would like others to hold of myself.
<i>Measurement #3 Brand Quality (Modified from Raushnabel and Ahuvia, 2013)</i>	
BQ1	Kumamon is good quality.
BQ2	Kumamon goods are well made.
<i>Measurement #4 Fan Community Engagement (Modified from Yoshida et al., 2015)</i>	
FC1	I often buy memorabilia to represent the fans of Kumamon. (Goods, apparel etc.)
FC2	I often talk to others or posting about my unique experiences shared with other fans of Kumamon.
FC3	I often attend Kumamon's events and activities to represent the fans of Kumamon.
<i>Measurement #5 Positive Emotional Connection (Modified from Raushnabel and Ahuvia, 2013)</i>	
PE1	When I first encountered Kumamon, I just felt 'Yes that's what I looking for'.
PE2	Kumamon is exciting.
PE3	I feel emotionally connected with Kumamon like he's an old friend.
<i>Measurement #6 Fan's intention</i>	
I1	I intend to visit Kumamon in Kumamoto.
I2	I am interested in visiting Kumamon in Kumamoto.
I3	I will recommend visiting Kumamoto to my friends or relatives.

Survey questionnaires were distributed to Kumamon fans in Thailand during the Kumamon Fans Thanksgiving Party 2017 in Bangkok (from 22nd March 2017 to 25th March 2017). There are 217 of total number of respondents who attended the event and returned valid questionnaire. Demographic characteristics of the respondents then were analyzed. Most of the respondents were female with 73.7% of the whole respondents. Approximately one-third of the respondent is in the 18-30 age range (48.3%), followed by 30-45 years old range at 36.8%, 9.2% were under 18 years old, and 5% were 45 years old or older. For the loyalty and period of time that fans has become attached to Kumamon, approximately more than half of the respondents were 1-3 years range (58%) of becoming a fan of Kumamon. 26.2% were in the range of less than 1 year, 11% were 3-4 years and 4.6% were 4 years or more.

There are some questions that have been conducted to test whether fans of Kumamon have visited Japan or the place of origin of the anthropomorphic brand or not. 61.7% of respondents answered that they have been to Japan, 17.9% of respondents have been to Kumamoto prefecture and 11% have been to Kumamon Square in Kumamoto prefecture.

Finally, the fans' behaviors such as anthropomorphism, self-brand congruity, positive emotional connection, and fan community engagement will be analyzed to

determine their significance in determining fans' intention to visit Kumamoto.

5. *Reliability Check (Cronbach's Alpha)*

The reliability of each construct has been tested by using Cronbach's Alpha in IBM SPSS statistical software. Cronbach's Alpha reliability statistics in SPSS program has been used to check the validity of each constructed measurements. In the final model, the alpha coefficients ranged from 0.82 to 0.93, suggesting high reliability of all constructs. Brand Quality was asked as one of the measurements in the survey design. However due to the low reliability value indicated by low Cronbach's Alpha value, the Brand Quality variable was excluded from this research. Table 3 summarized each of the construct's Cronbach's Alpha value.

Table 3 Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics			
Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Internal Consistency
Anthropomorphism	.86	3	Good
Self-Brand Congruity	.82	3	Acceptable
Positive Emotional Connection	.88	3	Good
Fan Community Engagement	.84	3	Good
Fans Intention	.93	3	Excellent

6. Validity Check (Bivariate Pearson Correlation Analysis)

The Pearson correlation coefficients tool has been used to check the validity of scale which computes for five dimensions: anthropomorphism, self-brand congruity, fan community engagement, positive emotional connection and fan intention. The result of the correlations is summarized at Table 4. The variable A1 to A3 refer as each questions in anthropomorphism, BC1 to BC3 in self-brand congruity, FC1 to FC3 as fan community engagement, PE1 to PE3 as positive emotional connection and I1 to I3 as fans intention, respectively as coded in Table 2.

The discriminant validity occurred during the process. As in Table 4, it shows the correlation between each variable is all highly significant (p value <0.01) at 99% confidence level. From total 15 variables, there are 3 variables that have greater ex-variable correlation than the in-variable correlation. BC1, FC2 and I3 were determined as the discriminant items and were removed in order to make the correlation value converge in each item of the variables. Thus, these three discriminant items were not included in further analysis. The exclusion of these variables had also slightly improved the Cronbach's Alpha value from the initial value before the exclusion of the items. From this validity check, the main analysis was done with Structural Equation Modeling, or also known as Path Analysis, using IBM SPSS Amos to see the relationship between variables

and prove the theoretical framework hypotheses later which will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Table 4: Bivariate Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson Correlation	A1	A2	A3	BC2	BC3	FC1	FC3	PE1	PE2	PE3	I1	I2
A1	1	.73	.65	.43	.35	.42	.38	.53	.56	.45	.39	.45
A2	.73	1	.64	.37	.33	.43	.38	.56	.58	.44	.39	.43
A3	.65	.64	1	.44	.36	.45	.34	.50	.55	.48	.34	.38
BC2	.43	.37	.44	1	.69	.44	.33	.53	.41	.44	.37	.41
BC3	.35	.33	.36	.69	1	.45	.33	.47	.37	.47	.36	.35
FC1	.42	.43	.45	.44	.45	1	.72	.61	.49	.58	.57	.50
FC3	.38	.38	.34	.33	.33	.72	1	.61	.50	.61	.60	.56
PE1	.53	.56	.50	.53	.47	.61	.61	1	.73	.74	.62	.55
PE2	.56	.58	.55	.41	.37	.49	.50	.73	1	.68	.54*	.49
PE3	.45	.44	.48	.44	.47	.58	.61	.74	.68	1	.64	.59
I1	.39	.39	.33	.36	.36	.57	.60	.62	.54	.64	1	.88
I2	.45	.43	.38	.41	.35	.50	.56	.55	.49	.59	.88	1

All Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis Testing

This chapter will explain about the findings of the data using structural equation modeling (or abbreviated as SEM), which is known also as path analysis model that has been use to test the connection between each variable for all hypotheses. The findings of this analysis as well as the result of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 5.

Table 4 Standardized Parameter Estimates (t-value) and Hypothesis Testing

Path	Hypothesis	<i>Kumamon fans in Thailand</i> (<i>n</i> = 217) Path Coefficient
Anthropomorphism		
→ Self-Brand congruity	H1	.45**
→ Positive Emotional Connection	H2	.49**
→ Fan Community Engagement	H3	.32**
Self-Brand Congruity		
→ Positive Emotional Connection	H4a.	.33**
→ Fan Community Engagement	H4b.	.36**
Positive Emotional Connection		
→ Fan Intention	H5a.	.46**
Fan Community Engagement		
→ Fan Intention	H5b.	.33**
R²		
Self-Brand congruity		.21
Fan Community Engagement		.34
Positive Emotional Connection		.50
Fan Intention		.45
Fit indices		
χ^2 (df)		57.99(3)
χ^2		19.33
GFI		.91
CFI		.89
* p < .05; ** p < .01		

In order to test the first Hypothesis (H1): ‘*Anthropomorphism is positively*

related to self-brand congruity.' The first hypothesis shows the positive relationship between anthropomorphism to self-brand congruity in the direct way (Direct Effect = .45). The significance level of the Standardized Total Effects for both variables is also less than .01 which proves that Anthropomorphism has a significant positive effect to self-brand congruity. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 (H1) can be accepted. (Anthropomorphism → Self-brand congruity p = .001)

As for Hypothesis 2 (H2.): *'Anthropomorphism is positively related to positive emotional connection to the anthropomorphic brand.'* The result shows that Anthropomorphism has the highest Standardized Direct Effects to the Positive Emotional Connection (Direct Effect = .49). The significance level of the Standardized Total Effects in this variable is less than .01 which prove that Anthropomorphism has significant positive effect to Positive Emotional Connection thus Hypothesis 2 (H2) can be accepted (Anthropomorphism → Positive Emotional Connection p = .001)

For the Hypothesis 3 (H3): *'Anthropomorphism is positively related to fan community engagement.'* Hypothesis 3 shows that Anthropomorphism has significant Standardized Direct Effects to the Positive Emotional Connection (Direct Effect = .49), while in the Path Analysis construct it is also shown that Anthropomorphism has also significant Standardized Direct Effect to Fan Community Engagement (Direct Effect

= .32). Even though Anthropomorphism has the higher level of Standardized Total Effects to the Positive Emotional Connection (Total Effect = .49), the significance level of the Standardized Total Effects for both variables are also less than .01 which proves that Anthropomorphism has a significant positive effect to both Positive Emotional Connection and Fan Community Engagement. Thus, Hypothesis 3 (H3) can be accepted. (Anthropomorphism → Positive Emotional Connection $p=.001$) and (Anthropomorphism → Fan Community Engagement $p=.001$)

In Hypothesis 4 (H4a.): *'Self-brand congruity is positively related to positive emotional connection.'* And (H4b.): *'Self-brand congruity is positively related to fan community engagement.'* The result shows that Self-Brand Congruity has significant Standardized Direct Effects to the Positive Emotional Connection (Direct Effect = .33) and Fan Community Engagement (Direct Effect = .36). Comparing these two variables in H4, it could be understood that Self-Brand Congruity has higher level of Standardized Total Effects compared to the Fan community engagement (Total Effect = .36). The significance level of the Standardized Total Effects in both variables are also less than .01 which proves that Self-brand Congruity has a positive significant effect to both Positive Emotional Connection and Fan Community Engagement, thus Hypothesis 4, both (H4a.) and (H4b.) can be accepted. (Self-Brand Congruity → Positive Emotional Connection

p=.001) and (Self-Brand Congruity → Fan Community Engagement p=.001)

For the last two Hypotheses, H5a; '*Positive emotional connection is positively associated with fans' intention to visit the anthropomorphic brand's origin.*' and (H5b.): '*Fan community engagement is positively associated with fans' intention to visit the anthropomorphic brand's origin.*' The structure of SEM would allow us to verify the significant relationship between *Positive Emotional Connection* and *Fan Community Engagement* towards *Fan Intention*. The results shown that both *Positive Emotional Connection* and *Fan Community Engagement* have significant SDE (Standardized Direct Effects) to *Fan Intention*. Comparing these two variables in H5, it could be understood that *Positive Emotional Connection* has the higher level of Standardized Total Effects to the *Fan Intention* (Total Effects = .46). Since both the significance level of the Standardized Total Effects in these two variables are also less than .01, this proves that both variables have significant positive effect to Fan Intention thus **Hypothesis 5, (H5a.) and (H5b.) can be accepted** (Positive Emotional Connection & Fan Community Engagement → Fan Intention p =.001).

From the entire hypothesis testing results, it is shown that every hypothesis can be accepted with high significance (99% confidence, p<0.01) and have positive relationship result as seen from the positive Standardized Total Effects value. In-depth

process regarding the data analysis to test these hypotheses will be elaborated in further section.

1. Structural Equation Modelling

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used as the main data analysis procedure of the hypothesis testing. IBM SPSS Analysis Of Moment Structure (IBM SPSS AMOS) statistical software has been used to process the data of this SEM. The data was inputted into each variable as the mean value in SPSS. For instance, questions for the Anthropomorphism criteria in the survey was Question number 9 to 11 (Q.9 to Q.11), thus the mean value of these questions was computed and inputted to the model as the value of Anthropomorphism variable. Same mean value computational method also applies to other variables as well: Self-brand Congruity, Positive Emotional Connection, Fan Community Engagement, and Fan Intention.

Standardized Parameter Estimates (t-value) of each variables relationship is shown in Table 4. The correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of observed variables will also be discussed in this chapter.

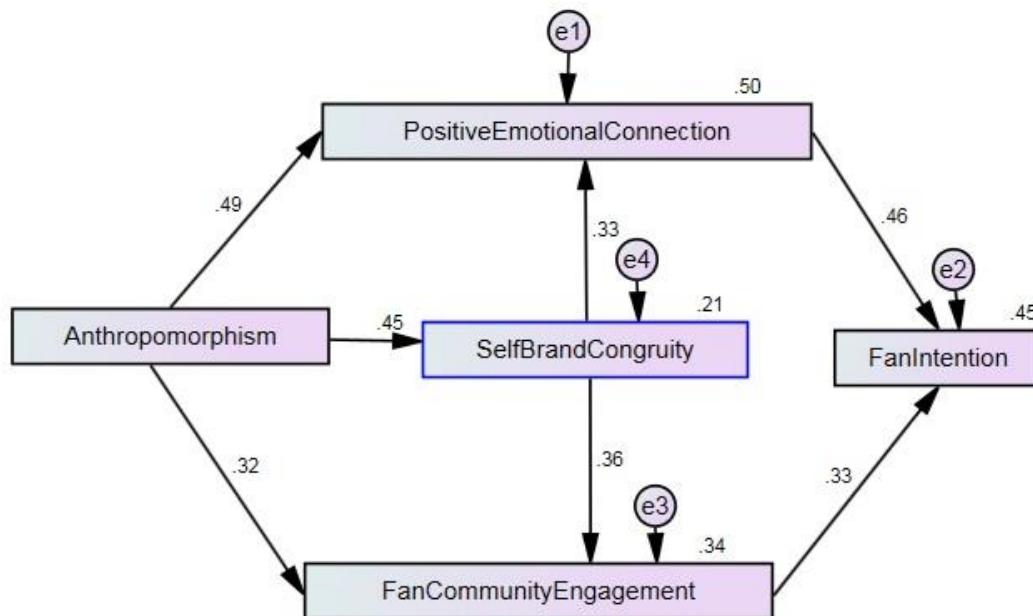


Figure 2: Path Analysis Model

This model (Figure 2) is created to analyze the relationship between hypotheses according to the total observed data. The square shapes represent each observed variable which included the inputted data in each variable for each subjects. There is one exogenous variable (Anthropomorphism) and four endogenous variables (Positive Emotional Connection, Self-brand congruity, Fan Community Engagement and Fan Intention). The number on the top of each arrow of the model shows the Standardized Regression Weights of each variable which is summarized in Table 4. The round shape variable (e1, e2, e3, e4) are the unobserved variable which is considered as an error during the data observation.

From the model and according to the Standardized Parameter Estimates (Table

4), the number of each variables proved that all arrows have a significant positive relationship. The positive effect of Positive Emotional Connection to Fan Intention is stronger (Total Effect = .46) compared to the Fan Community Engagement (Total Effect = .33). For the Positive Emotional Connection, Anthropomorphism has stronger positive effect (Total Effect = .49) compares to Self-brand Congruity (Total Effect = .45). And Self-brand Congruity has slightly stronger positive effect to the Fan community engagement (Total Effect = .36) compared to Positive emotional connection (Total Effect = .33).

2. Model Fit

The GFI (Goodness of Fit Index = 0.91) and CFI (Comparative Fit Index = 0.89) of the model shown in Table 4 indicates that this model have strongly good fit. It is believed that a construct is a good fit or good model the more the GFI is closer to 0.9 or even 0.95 to be a very good fit (Hoyle and Panter, 1995). The Chi-square value ($\chi^2 / df = 19.33$) in this model shows high value which is greater than 0.05, indicating good fit. The underlying factors that may have caused this will be explained later as the Bivariate Pearson Correlation analysis may hinted the source of the low number. This is an important point to be considered for further research as the model should be more

optimized before the data processing to ensure better GFI and Chi-square value.

3. *Model Validity Accounts*

This model has also shown the squared multiple correlations value for each of three endogenous variables which are Self-brand congruity, Positive Emotional Connection, Fan Community Engagement, and Fan Intention. For Positive Emotional Connection and Fan Intention, the squared multiple correlations value is high meaning these two variables have been describe sufficiently by the model (more than 40% accounted for both variables). For the Fan Community Engagement, which has lower squared multiple correlation number, it explains that this variable may have other affecting factors rather than Anthropomorphism and Self-Brand Congruity, as it only accounts for 34% of the observation in the model. Lastly, the self-brand congruity variable has only accounts for 21% from the whole model. The squared multiple correlations value is summarized in Table 5. Finally, this point is also considered as a point of improvement that is suggested for further researches.

Table 5: Squared Multiple Correlations Value

Variable	Estimate
Self-brand Congruity	.21
Fan Community Engagement	.34
Positive Emotional Connection	.50
Fan Intention	.45

Discussion

Using Kumamon as case study, this research also provides the understanding about the impact of local anthropomorphism. Kumamon can be said as one of the few local anthropomorphic brands that can attract non-local fans and has the ability to go international. Kumamon as anthropomorphic brand has developed and is able to support the prefecture's economic growth through tourism. All in all, this current research creates significant contribution to the previous literature pools and practices in four approaches.

First, this research has highlighted the importance of the *anthropomorphism* element itself in the anthropomorphism brand to fans especially related to positive emotional connection, which ultimately will lead to the fan's intention. Fans perceive the anthropomorphic product more positively compared to the ones that have not represent the anthropomorphic design (McGill, 2007). By accepting Hypothesis 2, it proves that the anthropomorphism has a positive significant effect to positive emotional connection, which refers the strong emotional feeling towards the loving brand (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). The high value of the path coefficient also suggests that anthropomorphism plays a relatively strong effect to positive emotional connection. Thus, Kumamon fans believe that Kumamon has his own intention and behaviors, which is created when Kumamon move and do humorous actions during the meeting with fans.

These actions that resembles humanlike object increases the anthropomorphism element of Kumamon, and it has been successfully proven that it also increases the positive emotional connection to fans, as they consider that Kumamon can experience emotional feelings. Therefore, it is important for anthropomorphism brands to learn Kumamon's characteristics that can generate this anthropomorphism.

Kumamon, the black bear character generates easy recognition of the image. Moreover, his humorous and *yurui* type of his act has created positive emotional connection with his fans in the direct way. Theoretically, Kumamon can be said as the anthropomorphism brand that combines all three typologies together. Firstly, Kumamon can be categorized in 'brand characters in pure design' typology as Kumamon does not have complicated or detailed design, but was able to represent the image of the Kumamoto Prefecture. Secondly, Kumamon can be categorized in 'brand characters with identity' typology as Kumamon was not created only to promote merchandises, but also become the ambassador or the spoke-character for Kumamoto Prefecture. Thirdly, Kumamon can be categorized as 'brand characters in animation' typology as Kumamon had also collaborated with an animation movie project in 2014. Thus, by combining these three typologies of anthropomorphism, such as in the case of Kumamon, it is proven that Kumamon can conceive high positive emotional connection from fans.

The second contribution of this study is the confirmation of significant relationship that Anthropomorphism indeed positively affects *Fan Community Engagement*. This contribution enriches previous literature by adding that higher level of Anthropomorphism also leads to higher Fan Community Engagement. Nonetheless, the limitation of the Fan Community Engagement itself is that it might have other affecting factors aside of Anthropomorphism, such as the observed Self-Brand Congruity and other factors since this model accounts to only 34% of the Fan Community Engagement. As brand community identification is defined as when the consumer of the brand community has the intensive connection between other brand community members (Keller, 2003; Muniz&O’Cuinn, 2001), the result of this study suggests that the anthropomorphism characteristic itself can be one of the factors that can lead fans to join the fan or brand mascot community and also provide the feeling of engagement, such as in the case of Kumamon.

In respect the fan’s intention to visit Kumamoto Prefecture, the third contribution assessed the importance of fans’ *Positive Emotional Connection* as the Path Coefficient suggested high positive correlation between the two variables. Fans’ stronger positive connection with the brand anthropomorphism provides will result in higher fan intention to visit the anthropomorphic brand’s origin, as proven in Hypothesis 5a. Since Positive

Emotional Connection could also be created by the brand's story that targeted specific demographics for marketing perspective, this can create unique experiences between consumer and the anthropomorphic brand. The positive consumer experience plays the important role for the strong relationship between the brands (Gregory, 2013), and the result of this study also suggests that it plays a strong positive relationship to increase the fans' intention to visit the promoted place as well. Nevertheless, even though in the SEM Positive Emotional Connection accounts moderately 50%, some other factors that may affect Positive Emotional Connection outside of Anthropomorphism and Self-Brand Congruity should be developed for further studies. For Kumamon, the brand itself successfully promotes Kumamoto prefecture with the increasing of number of tourists each year. The idea of destination marketing by using anthropomorphic brand mascot has helped Kumamoto Prefecture to become well-known globally.

Fourth, *Self-Brand Congruity*, which is defined when the relationship between consumers and the brand image is when both concepts connect and construct to each other has occurred (Sirgy, 1982), was examined in this research analysis as the second exogenous variable. Self-Brand Congruity is an intriguing variable as the emotional values are more prevalent in customer decision process, when consumers will feel right if they feel that this product is for them and could enduring motivations or intentions to

do something (Blackwell, Mimiard and Engel, 2006). Even though the impact of Self-Brand Congruity is not as big as Anthropomorphism indicated by the weight of the Path Coefficients, Self-Brand Congruity is still proven to be highly significant variable that affects both Positive Emotional Connection and Fan Community Engagement. Thus, Self-Brand Congruity remained important as this factor could not be ignored if anthropomorphism brand would attempt to increase the fan's intention to visit the promoted place, as self-brand congruity humanizes or personalizes the anthropomorphic brand.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has established the importance of Anthropomorphism as the vital element of destination marketing to increase the fans' intention to visit the promoted place. Destination marketing strategy should consider the most effective way to reflect the marketing direction that might involve the regional tourism plan (Tourism Victoria, 2014), thus regional destination marketing can consider the anthropomorphism brand to be one of the solid strategies to increase the positive emotional connection of the fans, which ultimately will lead to the fan's higher intention to visit the promoted place, such as in the case with Kumamon and Kumamoto Prefecture. Also, by keeping the anthropomorphism brand value consistent, this may also increase benefit for the brand anthropomorphism investors in long term. Given limited time, destination marketing using anthropomorphism brand should focus on improving the anthropomorphism characteristics of the brand itself as high anthropomorphism gives the most needed chain reaction effect to maximize the fan intention, as suggested in this research's result.

Another contribution to the destination marketing is to create more positive emotional connection between brand anthropomorphism and consumer. Previous literatures noted the impact of positive emotional connection between consumers and brands has become one of the factors that could drive willingness or intention of the

consuming behavior. (Karyn, 2008). The evidences from the current study has proved that high level of positive emotional connection can also increase fan's intention to visit anthropomorphism brand's origin. Kumamon case study shows that the high positive emotional connection does not only increase consuming behavior but also can increase their intention to go to the destination marketing which in this case Kumamoto prefecture. To create a positive emotional connection to the brand, brand's message, brand's activities and brand's image should be correlated to each other. Although in this research model only 40% of the Positive Emotional Connection was accounted for and further studies are highly encouraged to find other influencing factors than anthropomorphism, Positive Emotional Connection is still the most prominent influencing factor for the brand anthropomorphism for destination marketing.

Lastly, for the destination marketing purpose, it is crucial for business or government to collaborate with partners. The larger the network of the collaboration, the larger the number of tourists, consumers, and fans that will be exposed to the promoted place. For the Kumamon case, the brand has been collaborating with many partners, inside and outside of Japan. Eventually, these activities have increased the number of fans internationally, enabling Fan Community Engagement to be created. Positive Emotional Connection will also increase, and these are the two essential factors that lead to the

intention to visit anthropomorphism brand's origin.

Limitations and Direction for Future Researches

There are some limitations that should be addressed that may influence the result of this research. First, the result of validity check or correlation of all measurements shows that not only the proposed hypotheses only that have high correlation level. Hence, other pair of measurement, such as Positive Emotional Connection and Fan Community Engagement shows the high number of correlation value as well. This indicates positive association between these two variables that if Positive Emotional Connection increased, this will also strengthen the Fan Community Engagement. For the further researches using similar model, adding the relative path between Positive Emotional Connection and Fan Community Engagement in the SEM model may possibly help to enhance the understanding of the relationship between the two variables.

Second, on this case study the writer chose only to focus on the Japanese anthropomorphism brand that has the aim to promote the origin place. The focus of this research has specifically chosen to be Kumamon to study fans's behavior in relation to fans' intention to visit the promoted place. Thus, the result of this study may not be able to be generalized for every brand anthropomorphism for destination marketing since Kumamon originated from Japan as there are maybe some distinct characteristics of Japanese anthropomorphic brand. Thus, before generalizing this study into another brand

anthropomorphism from another country, some adjustments may need to be considered.

Third, despite the significant findings, the current developed model can still be improved as this model shows the GFI (Goodness of Fit Index) that is not optimal. While it's ideal for GFI should be over 0.9 or even 0.95 to be considered as a very robust model, the construct used in this empirical research has been supported by high Cronbach's Alpha value nevertheless. To improve the GFI, one suggestion is may be to create a relative path from Positive Emotional Connection to Fan Community Engagement as high correlation was discovered from Bivariate Pearson's Correlation analysis. Another suggestion is, of course, to consider other variables that have not been explored in this research to be included in the model.

Fourth, the targeted respondents of this research are focusing on Kumamon's Thai fans. The result of the model and measurement are considered to be narrow for only one group, as there may have some contrasting fan's characteristics and culture in other parts of the world. To generalize this study with fans or consumer from other country, the further study needs to consider about the consuming behavior and the divergence of the studied group.

Finally, the developed fan intention model in this research serves to advance the research of destination marketing by consider the impact of Anthropomorphism, Self-

Brand Congruity, Fan Community Engagement, and Positive Emotional Connection to the Fans Intention with the case of Kumamon of Kumamoto Prefecture. The proposed hypotheses, model, and recommendations for future studies provide plentiful contingencies to continue advancing the knowledge of brand anthropomorphism for destination marketing.

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Appendix

1. Survey for Kumamon's Thai Fans (English Version)

Kumamon's Thai Fans Survey

1. What is your gender?

Male Female Other

2. What is your age?

Under 18 18 – 30
 30 – 45 45 or older

3. How long have you liked Kumamon?

Less than 1 Year 1 - 3 Years
 3 – 4 Years 4 Years or more

4. I am a VIP member of Kumamon Thailand.

Yes No

5. Which purchasing channel you MOST often use to buy Kumamon's goods?

Buy at Thailand Kumamon official shop
 Ask some friends to buy from Japan
 Buy online or from Kumamonthailand.com
 Buy by yourself from Japan
 Other (Please answer _____)

6. I have been to Japan.

Yes No (Skip to Question 10)

7. I have been to Kumamoto prefecture.

Yes No (Skip to Question 10)

8. I have visited Kumamon at the Kumamon square.

Yes No

From question 9 to 25 , for each question below, circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about the statement, where: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Part 1: Anthropomorphism

	Not at all	To a small extent	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a Great Extent
9. To what extent does Kumamon seem to have a mind of its own?	1	2	3	4	5
10. To what extent does Kumamon seem to have intentions?	1	2	3	4	5
11. To what extent does Kumamon seem to experience emotions?	1	2	3	4	5

Part 2: Self-Brand Congruity

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
12. Kumamon is congruent with the image I hold of myself.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Kumamon is congruent with the image I would like to hold of myself.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Kumamon is congruent with the image I would like others to hold of myself.	1	2	3	4	5

Part 3: Brand Quality

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
15. Kumamon is good quality.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Kumamon is a good representative of Kumamoto prefecture.	1	2	3	4	5

Part 4: Fan Community Engagement

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
17. I often buy memorabilia to represent the fans of Kumamon. (Goods, apparel etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
18. I often talk to others or posting about my unique experiences shared with other fans of Kumamon.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I often attend Kumamon's events and activities to represent the fans of Kumamon.	1	2	3	4	5

Part 5: Positive Emotional Connection (*Intuitive fit, Positive affect, Emotional attachment*)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. When I first encountered Kumamon, I just felt 'Yes that's what I looking for'.	1	2	3	4	5
21. Kumamon is exciting.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I feel emotionally connected with Kumamon like he's an old friend.	1	2	3	4	5

Part 6: Fan's intention

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
23. I intend to visit Kumamon in Kumamoto.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I am interested to visit Kumamon in Kumamoto	1	2	3	4	5
25. I will recommend visiting Kumamoto to my friends or relatives.	1	2	3	4	5

2. Survey for Kumamon's Thai Fans (Thai Version)

แบบสอบถามแฟนคลับคুমะมงในประเทศไทย

แบบสอบถามเพื่อการศึกษาพฤติกรรมของประเภทของกลุ่มแฟนคลับที่มีประสิทธิภาพมากที่สุด
สำหรับการส่งเสริมการโปรโมทแบรนด์ท้องถิ่นด้วยมาสคอต

1. เพศ

ชาย หญิง อื่นๆ

2. อายุ

ต่ำกว่า 18 ปี 18 – 30
 30 – 45 45 หรือมากกว่า

3. คุณชื่นชอบคুমะมงมานานเท่าไร ?

น้อยกว่า 1 ปี 1 - 3 ปี
 3 – 4 ปี 4 ปี หรือมากกว่า

4. คุณเป็น VIP Member ของ Kumamon Thailand

ใช่ ไม่ใช่

5. ช่องทางใดที่คุณซื้อสินค้าของคুমะมงบ่อยที่สุด ?

ชื่อที่หน้าร้าน Official ของคুমะมง
 ผากเพื่อนซื้อมาจากญี่ปุ่น
 ซื้อออนไลน์ผ่านทาง Kumamonthailand.com
 ซื้อด้วยตัวเองจากญี่ปุ่น
 อื่นๆ (โปรดระบุ _____)

6. คุณเคยไปประเทศญี่ปุ่น

เคย ไม่เคย (ข้ามไปคำถามข้อที่ 10)

7. คุณเคยไปจังหวัดคумаโมโตะ

เคย ไม่เคย (ข้ามไปคำถามข้อที่ 10)

8. คุณเคยไปหาคุมะมงที่ Kumamon square.

เคย ไม่เคย

*** กรุณาพลิกเพื่อทำแบบสอบถามต่อ ***

จากคำถามที่ 9 – 25 จะเป็นคำถามที่ให้คุณได้เลือกตอบ โปรด เลือกข้อที่ตรงกับคำตอบของคุณมากที่สุด ตั้งแต่ 1 ถึง 5 โดย 1 = ไม่เห็นด้วยอย่างยิ่ง, 2 = ไม่เห็นด้วย, 3 = เฉยๆ, 4 = เห็นด้วย, 5 = เห็นด้วยอย่างยิ่ง

	ไม่เห็นด้วย อย่างยิ่ง	ไม่เห็นด้วย	เฉยๆ	เห็นด้วย	เห็นด้วย อย่างยิ่ง
9. คุณมองดูเหมือนจะมีชีวิตจิตใจเป็นของตัวเอง	1	2	3	4	5
10. คุณมองดูเหมือนจะมีความตั้งใจในการทำสิ่งต่างๆ	1	2	3	4	5
11. คุณมองดูเหมือนจะมีอารมณ์และความรู้สึก	1	2	3	4	5
12. คุณมองมีความเหมือนกับตัวฉัน	1	2	3	4	5
13. คุณมองมีความเหมือนกับสิ่งที่คุณอยากเป็น (เช่น มีความร่าเริง, มีความตลก, มีความกวน, มีความสดใส)	1	2	3	4	5
14. คุณมองมีความเหมือนกับสิ่งที่คุณต้องการให้คนอื่นมองเห็น (เช่น มีความร่าเริง, มีความตลก, มีความกวน, มีความสดใส...)	1	2	3	4	5
15. ให้คะแนนคุณมอง (จากการทำกิจกรรมต่างๆกับแฟนคลับ, การแสดง, การออกสื่อ เป็นต้น)	1	2	3	4	5
16. ให้คะแนนคุณภาพของสินค้าคุณมอง	1	2	3	4	5
17. ฉันซื้อสินค้าของคุณมองอยู่บ่อยๆเพื่อแสดงออกถึงการเป็นแฟนคลับ (สินค้าต่างๆ, เครื่องแต่งกาย เป็นต้น)	1	2	3	4	5
18. ฉันพูดถึงหรือโพสต์ข้อความเกี่ยวกับประสบการณ์ต่างๆของแฟนคลับคุณมองกับคนอื่นอยู่บ่อยๆ	1	2	3	4	5
19. ฉันเข้าร่วมงานกิจกรรมต่างๆของคุณมองและเข้าร่วมกิจกรรมเพื่อแสดงความเป็นแฟนคลับของคุณมองอยู่บ่อยๆ	1	2	3	4	5
20. พอฉันเจอคุณมองครั้งแรก ฉันรู้สึกว้าว ใช่ นี่คือนี่สิ่งที่คุณกำลังมองหาอยู่	1	2	3	4	5
21. คุณมองเป็นอะไรที่น่าตื่นเต้น	1	2	3	4	5
22. ฉันรู้สึกผูกพันกับคุณมอง ราวกับว่าเขาคือเพื่อนเก่า	1	2	3	4	5
23. ฉันตั้งใจที่จะไปหาคุณมองที่จังหวัดคุมาโมโตะ	1	2	3	4	5
24. ฉันสนใจที่จะไปจังหวัดคุมาโมโตะ	1	2	3	4	5
25. ฉันจะแนะนำเพื่อนหรือญาติให้ไปจังหวัดคุมาโมโตะ	1	2	3	4	5

ขอขอบคุณทุกท่านที่ให้ความร่วมมือ โดยข้อมูลส่วนตัวของท่านจะไม่ถูกนำไปเผยแพร่และจะเก็บเป็นความลับสำหรับการทำวิทยานิพนธ์เท่านั้น

