

M-BRANDING IN THAI UNIVERSITIES: IS THIS WHERE UNIVERSITY MARKETING IS HEADED?

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ABSTRACT

The Research on branding in higher education appears to be in its infancy, as little empirical research has been conducted specifically targeting branding in higher education. University branding strategy, technology issues, and stakeholder branding issues are discussed which forms the model that underpins that qualitative inquiry of six private university managers involved in university marketing practices. In this paper, the implications for branding developments through mobile technologies are discussed; and concludes with a discussion of the future of M-branding reflecting a useful managerial tool that requires a more integrated approach in the Thai higher education system that results from a combination of technology, software, staff development and consequent student engagement.

Index Terms— brands, mobile, strategy, technology, university

1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing for Thai higher education institutions now involves both a domestic, and also an international focus, although this wasn't always seen as necessary or desirable [35]. However, branding in Thai education is inclined to be perceived along the lines of university names and which are not conceived in terms of any individual branding developments *the way tangible products do* [92]. Little has been written about the use of electronic mobile devices in branding developments; and within the sphere of Thai higher education research is perhaps somewhat more limited. As such research on branding in higher education appears to be in its infancy [43], as little empirical research has been conducted specifically targeting branding in higher education [37]. Further, the research literature on management views of m-branding in Thailand also appears to be somewhat poor, if not non-existent.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 University branding strategy

Higher education markets in Thailand have experienced a number of drivers that are seen as pivotal in terms of changing marketing practices. These drivers include the rise in competition [27;28] resulting in changes to recruitment strategies [14] which is perceived as consequent upon declining student numbers [60] arising from on-going recessive pressures. Branding practices in universities has therefore become a dominant and important theme in the oversupplied Thai pedagogic market [93]. The long-term effects of these *drivers* on the competition between universities [27] has resulted in the need for Thai universities to differentiate themselves from the competition [22]. Thus, most Thai higher education institutions have experienced the effects of consistent declines in their student enrolments [60], highlighting the central, if not primary, role of brand marketing in student recruitment practices [86; 84]. Adding to increased competition is the spectre of another recession that not only contributes to less student numbers but also challenges Thai universities to make more effective strategic choices relative to programme offerings.

The above initiates new challenges for Thai university management because of an increasingly competitive higher education environment [11], as many universities in Thailand have now also begun to realise the importance of using sound marketing strategies to stay competitive [45]. University management may find that *...it is generally difficult to develop a strong brand identity, harder with services than products, and particularly difficult with an infrequent service purchase* [44], such as with prospective stakeholders/students. However, marketing practices traditionally involved the utilisation of specific techniques such as advertising, market research and low-level branding [17] resulting in the partial adoption of branding techniques designed to enhance the university's overall image and is consistent with behaviour changes reported from past research findings into the competitive advantage of service industries [2]. Additionally, potential changes to Thai governmental educational policy [68] which supports reduced funding for major universities, has led to an increased need for marketing initiatives through inevitable

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market reform [13] in order to encourage increased student recruitment through an opportunistic privatisation agenda [66]. Robust international education brands have started to evolve [36; 64] and this puts pressure on the Thai international higher education student market as it is perceived by many to be in the developmental stage [62] and as a result so is Thai university branding developments.

Connecting the targeted stakeholder/student with a consistent message is thus a new imperative for Thai higher education marketers and correspondingly sets a difficult challenge for present university marketers [79]. The effects of stakeholder/student perceptions of university programme offerings [26] and the brand image conveyed needs to be managed appropriately [49; 69]. As a result, it has become an operational imperative for universities to market themselves to interested stakeholders – the most important of which are students and their opinions [58] – directly through contemporary marketing techniques using modern technologies such as mobile media and focused database marketing [87]. Consequently, branding matters [65] in terms of the perceived meaning of the university name or logo as brands relate the identified product/service attributes to perceived segment needs [48]; to help consumers distinguish products/services from the competition [2]; reinforce buying actions [54]; reduces stakeholder/student confusion [53]; adds to a buyers perceptual needs in terms of status/prestige [51] and is part of the value proposition designed into the communications process between the consumer and the brand [3]. Ultimately, successful university brand management is anticipated to result in increased student retention rates [9]. These outcomes can be clearly understood when considering universities such as Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton and Oxford.

2.2. Stakeholder branding issues

While the notion and practice of m-branding is considered an *emerging phenomenon in current brand management* [46], it is nevertheless underpinned by appropriate CRM concepts [5] as the internet technologies are considered a useful tool in building brand awareness [81]. M-branding is not just considered to be about branding using portable devices, but branding across digital and cultural contexts [61]. As such, Kramer [57] indicates that technologies linking identified segment needs to digital offerings have now become commonplace where newer technologies tend to influence people's decisions [97] resulting in a greater pervasion of techno-social interaction. At universities, this is attributed to an innovative and practical extension of visible e-learning practices through the use of mobile phones [70] as students appear to *like the appeal of multimedia delivery* [98] and is thus considered another branding channel [12] for utilising marketing practices where an early e-learning orientation corresponds with early branding developments [40].

Benady [8] suggests that there is *no such thing as a global consumer*, and this can be translated into m-branding, as there is no such as a global student – each targeted segment has to be faultlessly derived in order to ensure appropriate brand development.

2.3. Technology issues

Ally [1] defined m-learning as the delivery of electronic learning materials to mobile devices; and this is fine-tuned in this paper to mean m-branding as the delivery of electronic brand media, support materials and messages to mobile devices perceived as relevant to stakeholder/student segments. Unfortunately, targeting remains one of the ubiquitous problems of electronic media personalisation developments [73] through which to deliver appropriate adjustments in brand content provision. Numerous researchers have discussed digital system developments [75; 20; 90] and have shown how user data can be used to provide appropriate content/information streams that match targeted user needs. More appropriate to this paper, Zhang and Shijagurumayum [99] used the concept of *user metadata* as a profile underpinning the delivery of targeted and customized content to mobile-phone users. This has not been lost in pedagogic developments, as research has focused on how students may be assisted in receiving individualised and personalised knowledge content [25] whether as assisted learning in the classroom [15] or through distance-learning programmes [76; 24]. Consequently, it has become an operational imperative for universities to market themselves to interested stakeholders [28] – the most important of which are students and their opinions [58] – directly through contemporary higher technologies such as mobile devices [87]. These three major aspects are depicted in Figure 1, below.

2.4 Questions Raised

As such several important questions are raised in connection with this – how do university management view contemporary branding developments in Thai higher education?; what are the implications of managerial views on continuing brand development in private universities in Thailand?; and, why is there are need for branding developments targeted to stakeholder/student mobile devices?

M-branding helps target effectively to one student – as long as the appropriate data channels are utilised. A likely developing issue is that personalisation of branding media requires a personalised target – and there is nothing more personal than a mobile phone.

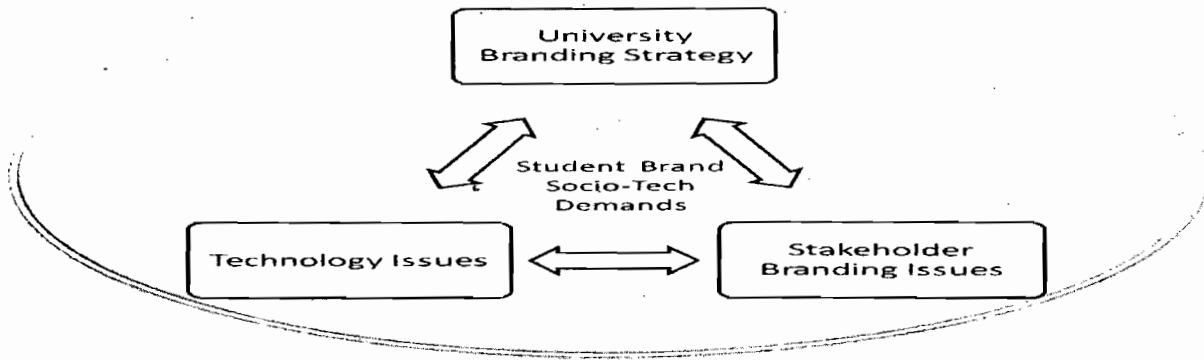


Figure 1 - Major Literature Issues

3. METHODOLOGY

To consider more implicitly the issues involved, this empirical groundwork utilised an interpretive approach to understand the perceptions of university management experiences of international programmes (English curriculum) of Thai private universities [96] using a semi-structured questionnaire providing an appropriate element of context and flexibility [18]. Given the lack of purposeful research in this area, this methodology is seen as appropriate to generating contextual data for the purpose of creating richer theory development [19].

The population for this study was international college managers in twelve private universities in Bangkok (based on 16). The criteria of theoretical purpose and relevance [34] were applied to the population and using Glaser's sampling processes [33], nine universities were approached. However, three declined for a number of reasons which related mostly to a lack of interest in branding or more specifically, to mobile branding. Six college managers were thus determined as the resultant sample frame which could be considered convenience sampling [after 41] and thus conditionally not representative of the targeted population. Each interview was audio recorded for future analysis. Interviews were conducted in English. Interviews took approximately one hour. All interviews were recorded on audio-tape after gaining explicit permission, and were later transcribed verbatim. The conduct of the interviews follows a similar process as used by Gray & Wilcox [38], with each individual group being asked the same set of questions modified through ancillary questioning (probes and follow-ups) in the same way as Balshem [6]. To increase the reliability of the data, the actual transcription was returned to each respondent group - via e-mail - for correction, addition or deletion and return which followed the process of validated referral [78]. Whole-process validity was achieved as the respondents were considered professionals

[91] and knowledgeable of the context and content associated with the research orientation.

Each interview was manually coded initially using Copernic desktop according to sub-themes that 'surfaced' from the interview dialogue using a form of open coding which is derived from Glaser [32] and Straus & Corbin [85]; and also by using a checklist matrix based on Miles & Huberman [67]. This treatment was also reinforced and extended through the use of thematic analysis conducted using the NVivo qualitative software package [96]. Each interview was treated and coded independently. In this way, no portion of any interview dialogue was left uncoded and the outcome represented the shared respondents views and perspectives. Various themes were detected from the use of this package, as well as from the manual coding. This dual form of interrogation was an attempt to increase the validity of the choice of both key themes and sub-themes through a triangulation process. NVivo was further used to explore these sub-themes by helping to pull together each of these sub-themes from all the interviews [42]. In this way, it was possible to capture each respondent's comments on each supported sub-theme and place them together for further consideration and analysis.

4. RESULTS

In general when asked what branding strategies are utilised, the overall reported response was only towards the university brand - very little, if any, was directed to programme brands such as an MBA. It was recognised by many that the... *issues are complex. Students are technologically aware. We can take advantage of this because if we don't - some other university will* (University E).

Major Issues raised are stated below in terms of respondents representative views relating to related major themes.

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4.1 University branding strategy - sub-themes

Brand Rationale

We need to develop sustainable advantage over our competitors and one way to do just this is connecting directly with students. Of course, we have to train our staff too, but fundamentally this has to be directed at the student segment, (University A).

Brand Message

Our marketing ethos has to be to continually match segment needs, (University C).

We have to monitor, assess, re-strategise and then make sure that we listen to what students want. Otherwise they will go to the competition, (University E).

Brand Recognition

In essence, marketing practices must change. We have to get inside their heads. Our name must be in their eyes, (University D).

Push advertising

One major problem is of course, brand content. We have to be careful to match their technology, otherwise the message may be garbled and we will have lost a branding opportunity, (University B).

I notice that some students don't like being sent messages too much. However, targeted messages linking good PR with student needs and program notices, will help with brand support, (University B).

The constant stream of advertising makes students indifferent. We need to get close to them – get personal, (University A).

4.2 Technology issues - sub-themes

Software Development

One of the major priorities is to define and develop software that we can use safely and seamlessly that supports our use and student employment of the various mobile technologies, (University D).

We would like to develop more suitable software, but it is expensive to produce, (University C).

Staff need more training in order to supply software that is useful to students, (University B).

We have a problem with bandwidth that restricts what and how messages are sent. This needs some thinking about how it could be resolved, (University F).

We think that we lack testing capability as it is difficult to know how our messages are being seen by students with so many mobile devices available, (University C).

Support

Support is essential – not only for staff, but also for students, (University E).

We cannot provide the service without good support mechanisms, (University A).

Inevitably, support levels will determine how effective our branding strategies are, (University B).

Cost

We have been forced to buy levels of technology that to us isn't really cost-effective, (University E).

We are concerned that cost increases which are beyond our control will reduce our technology use, but our strategy is to connect to students – so we must absorb this cost, (University B).

Whatever the cost, we have to pay it. We need to help students understand our brand, (University F).

Technological Flexibility

We need to innovate to really communicate our brand. We need to change our style; our ethos; and most of all we need to change how we deal with students, learners, parents, employers and of course with our staff. Technology is the major driver for this, (University C).

Access

Gaining access is a big issue, because when we send a message to them, they will turn off, if they can't access what it is that we send, (University C).

We have to make it easier for students to respond and that means training them to easily access the system. We need to make it simple – but also secure – that is the challenge, (University E).

Training

We have carried out some training – mostly on ICT skills – but we need more in terms of understanding students needs, (University D).

Students need to be trained to pick up and open our media messages. Although many students can do this, they need help to respond successfully, (University A).

Privacy

I'm concerned that some students may perceive that our message might be an intrusion, (University E).

We recognise that privacy issues are paramount and that m-branding may incline students to perceive our brand in a negative way, (University B).

We try to assure all our students that personal data is kept secret and will never be made available to third parties. Obviously this is an issue that we are aware of when students utilise our wireless applications, (University F).

Unfortunately, encryption appears to slow messages through the system and as such are difficult to manage, (University C).

Coverage and Infrastructure

Our messages are sent without knowing where our students are geographically – they may be on campus, on a train, bus or at home. We have no way of knowing, (University D).

Our messages must permeate across the city, and we rely on our service providers to get our message out. Unfortunately, outside Bangkok, that may not be feasible or practical, (University A).

Integration

Significantly, we have to ensure a diversified message that is seamlessly integrated into the various mobile technologies that are used. We cannot afford to focus on one specific technology; we have to test and retest so that the message is received as we intended. The same message must be available for multiple platforms, (University C).

4.3 Stakeholder branding issues - sub-themes

Flexibility

As students have different mobile phones, they will have different capabilities. We cannot please everyone, (University D).

Do we provide high level graphics and video, when only 22% of our students have devices that can receive this. Consequently, student mobile phones limit what we can do – and unfortunately this creates a difficulty because students often change their phones, (University B).

Interactivity

The technology of today's mobile phones are excellent. This helps us introduce levels of interactivity we could only imagine 2 years ago, (University A).

Students love playing games on their phones, so making sure that levels of interactivity are high is a must, (University F).

Students needs

No one is connecting with students. They appear distant in terms of our marketing effort. We have to do something, (University E).

Convenience

We have to support the brand image of the university; but this must be done at times and places when it is convenient for each segment – that is, when students are best placed to take advantage of our branding strategy, (University C).

Personalisation

Every student is different and requires different things. For example, younger students behave differently to older students. We can't send the same message to everyone, (University A).

We can't treat all students the same. Brand personalisation recognises this and facilitates an on-line experience that ensures students keep coming back, (University D).

Cost

We have found that the take-up of messages is low because of the cost of reply – especially for mobile phones. Whilst we cannot control the price of such services, we can use the most appropriate software to ensure that we don't inflate the cost media message response, (University F).

The scope of the sub-theme observations can be seen in Table 1, below:

Univ/Theme	UBS	Tech Issues	SB Issues	Total
A	2	3	2	7
B	1	4	1	6
C	1	6	1	8
D	1	3	2	6
E	1	4	1	6
F	1	3	2	6
Total	7	23	9	39

Table 1 - Sub-theme observations

5.RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The above statement of the results from this research suggests that m-branding practices are only just being considered as part of university marketing strategy improvements. However, there does appear to be branding concerns raised by university management which must be assessed and evaluated if a more effective branding strategy is to be developed and utilised. Further implications are discussed using the three main areas from the research framework contained in Figure 2, below.

5.1 University branding strategy

The main outcomes of this research strongly support the notion that management is aware of the need to engage more effectively with stakeholders/students [89], when seeking developments in brand recognition [29; 55], acceptance and growth in order to create a strong brand [31] in terms of security [88] and overall brand benefits [48]. Since brand

marketing in higher education is perceived in its infancy, stakeholders/students must be encouraged to unify behind a brand strategy that fits in with their segment orientation [89]. Consequently, brand development is commercially and professionally different from general marketing or advertising development, as the segment representation of the HE brand-market engagement becomes more technologically conscious. Managers appear to think that branding operates in the same schema as push-advertising. This may be detrimental to the whole notion of brand development [31] and any consequent *new ways of building relationships with customers* [89] as advertising is considered one-way communication, whereas branding is at least a two-way process.

Building brands that have a *sustainable advantage* and *connecting directly with students* in order to *continually match segment needs* appears to be a major requirement in the construction and reinforcement [29] of the university brand strategy; otherwise students may go elsewhere [28].

5.2 Technology issues

Software [82] was raised as an essential issue on the support of branding developments. This was seen to compound the issue of flexibility, access, privacy, personalisation [50] and raised the notion of cost concerns [1]. Training issues were highlighted for both university staff and students as any software required for the smooth operational interface needed to be simple [50] and secure in order to support the branding message [89; 12]. The data suggests that coverage [72; 94] and any corresponding infrastructure [30] may influence how the message was delivered and its viable content, indicating that technology understanding was a crucial requirement in ensuring appropriate flexible m-branding developments and opportunities [39]. This raises the notion that the service provider may unduly influence student's perception of the message, irrespective of the designed message intent. Seamless integration issues would therefore influence the how and the what of the branding message [23].

5.3 Stakeholder brand issues

Personalisation [83; 50], and cost issues were raised [77] as a major factor underpinning m-branding development directed at student segments. Additional efforts directed at reducing cost constraints may therefore persuade students to associate more effectively with the university brand, and this in itself suggests that those universities willing to make the brand message-response cost less for students, will receive more valuable responses in terms of numbers and further potential engagement. Interactivity notions [100] would indicate not only a need for students to connect socially and psychologically with the brand message but also follow through in terms of an appropriate response [71]. Clearly

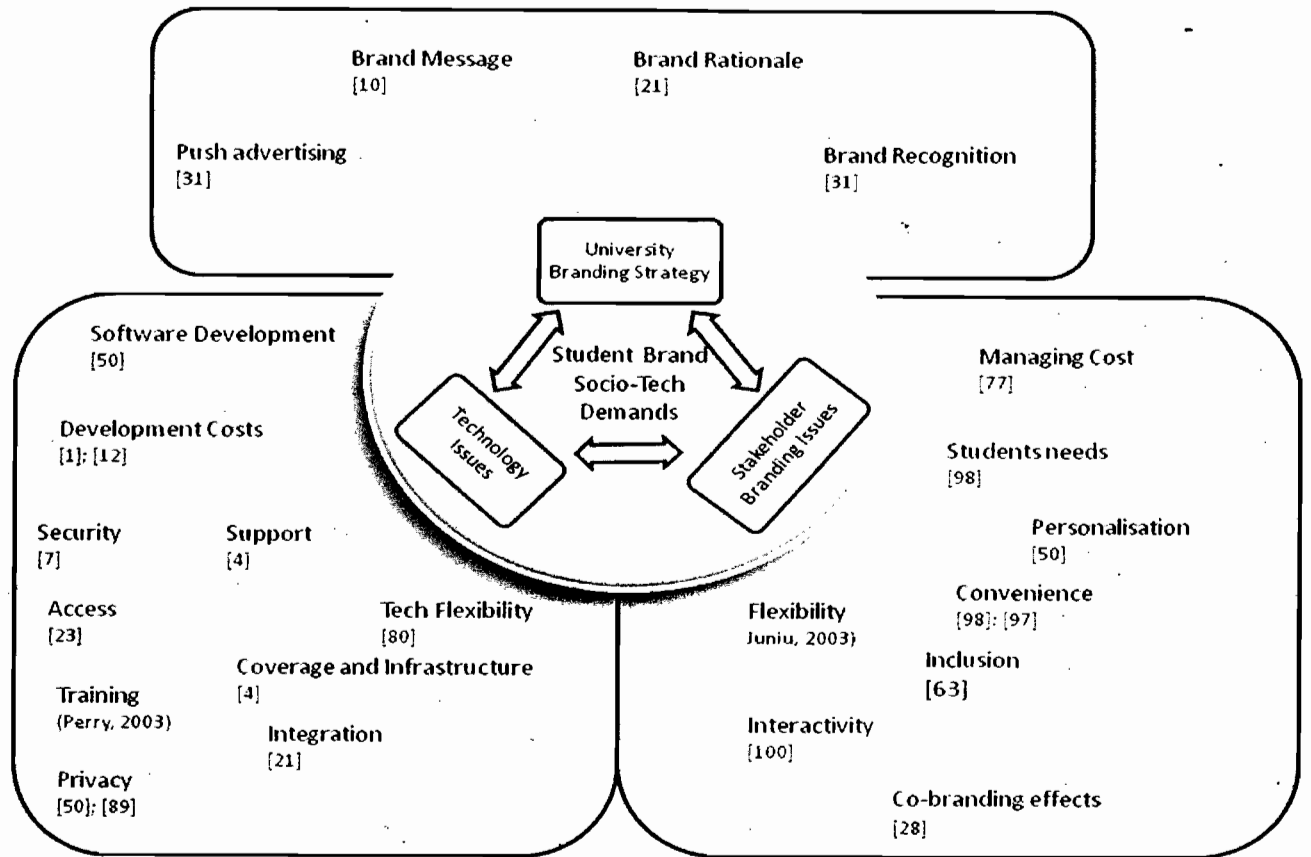


Figure 2- Research Outcomes

University managers appear to be aware of such issues but may not be in a position to equitably unify such segment involvement through lack of technology engagement and assessment.

This research outcome is modeled below in Figure 2, above.

6.FUTURE ISSUES

M-branding cannot be seen as an isolated aspect of the university marketing strategy [47] in terms of positioning [3] and a communication strategy [56], and thus in order to effectively engage its practices requires knowledge and understanding of the effects of appropriate technological developments and use. In this respect, an analysis of the future of m-branding suggests that:

- 1 Social-campus community development through mobile technology engagement utilising communication-intensive synchronous brand knowledge construction through peer-social reinforcement mechanisms.
- 2 Promotion of the development of information literacy [59] and collaborative segment brand learning.
- 3 Student led M-branding services may enhance whole-university performance.

- 4 Multi-tasking technology requires multi-channel branding initiatives.
- 5 Tracking technology can indicate when segment target opens, listens and/or responds to brand messages.
- 6 Viral-brand marketing techniques made easier to initiate as the brand message is personalised by the target.
- 7 Brand media can be selectively sent in response to target behaviour – which reduces media and message waste and keeps the brand fresh.
- 8 Opportunities for stakeholder/student involvement – “be the first to know” - will grow.
- 9 Live-synchronous data and real-time monitoring of target behaviour in terms of responses and non-responses, and allows immediate feedback about what works and what doesn't. Eg. Time of day responses, volumes, segments etc.
- 10 Changes in marketing vision and *managing by data* ethos will be necessary.
- 11 Personalisation of content will be needed, as content drives m-branding, but will be mediated through access to appropriate technology and thus is not limited to the university campus.
- 12 Supports both synchronous and asynchronous branding initiatives.

7. CONCLUSION

While there may be a valid criticism that universities may use the mobile device as a new channel because *it is there*, there is evidence that management may take the opportunity that in essence, relate the university brand to students using personal media-messaging that underpins some sense of belonging and psychological association.

The data would indicate that in order to move the university to a more informed framework for utilising m-branding practices, more technical marketing involvement is required of management and staff. Support services linking m-branding developments to the wider university community (stakeholders/students) through more effective measures designed to enhance and improve present best branding practices and attitudes may result in greater confidence associated with university branding strategies.

Thus, m-branding reflecting a useful managerial tool would appear to require a more integrated approach in the Thai higher education system that results from a combination of technology, software, staff development and consequent student engagement.

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