Exploring Sources of a University's Awareness and Contact Channels Used among Prospective Students: A Case Study of a Private University in Thailand

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Abstract
The intensity of competition for new student enrollments at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels has increased greatly among private higher education institutions in Thailand in recent years. This study explored the effective sources of a university's awareness and the contact channels used by 400 prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students who expressed their interest to apply to one private university in Thailand, which will be kept anonymous in this specific study. The results indicate that online searching/browsing was the most common awareness source in general, but especially for the postgraduate group, whereas high school activities was mentioned as the most significant source by the undergraduate group. The study results also pointed out that the university's website was the most common channel that was used to make contact for the postgraduate group, whereas most of the undergraduate prospects first contacted the university during the school-visit activities undertaken by the university marketing and admissions teams. The conclusion presents several suggestions for Thai universities to be able to use, in order to gain positive results in their future marketing and sales activities.

Keywords: Consumer behavior; information sources; higher education; educational management; service marketing; Thailand

1. Background

Public and private universities in Thailand are facing challenges due to the decline in student enrollments according to Mala (2016) and Study International (2016). Thailand had the highest participation rate in tertiary education among countries with a similar income level, for almost fifteen years, during 1999-2012 (OECD/UNESCO, 2016). The total market size of Thai higher education, including tuition fees, service fees, thesis registration and research fees, was estimated to be circa 50.5 billion Thai Baht or 1.49 billion USD in 2007 (Kasikorn Research Center, 2010). As for the market share, public universities represented 72 percent and private universities held 28 percent of the total higher education market (Kasikorn Research Center, 2008).

However, in 2015, among the 170 universities in Thailand offering 4,100 programs which could have accepted 156,216 students in total, the actual figure achieved meant that there were merely 105,046 applicants, based on the entrance exams (Mala, 2016; Study International, 2016). One could argue that this significant drop in numbers will more than likely lead to more intense competition for new enrollments among Thai higher education institutions in the near future. The long-term outlook of the significant decline in demand for university places was also predicted by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), which is the national economic planning agency in Thailand, as the population of school-age pupils will steadily drop from 62.3 percent to 20 percent of the total population by 2040 (Study

International, 2016), which is in just over twenty years time. Private universities could well suffer a more directly negative impact from the predicted increasing demand shortage. For example, the study of Kitsawad (2013) stated clearly that public universities were considered – by Thai students from both private and public high schools – as being the most important in their choice of higher education, when compared to private universities or affiliated institutes to religious organizations. The findings were also in line with MBA students who also noted that they preferred public universities to private universities, especially from the 'credibility' perspective (Tothamcharean, 2013). Marginson (2006) described a typical segmentation of competition in national higher education systems into three broad segments, namely: 1) "elite research universities"; 2) "aspirant research universities"; and 3) "teaching-focused universities", where the institutions in the third segment tended to be student-volume and revenue-income driven.

Most of the Thai private universities would fit into the third category, as was indicated by the private university students' opinions about the competitive direction of their universities, where the majority of the students (69.8 percent) believed that their own university was mainly aimed towards only the teaching focus (Kaewsantia, 2013). To cope with the challenges that are clearly lying ahead for private universities, Maringe & Mourad (2012) indicated a marketing concept, applied from what was created by Kotler (2003), for the higher education institutions, into four specific perspectives: 1) a production view (access & availability); 2) a product view (excellence & superiority); 3) a customer needs view (relevance); and 4) a social justice view (justice, equity ethics, sustainability), to help define university value propositions.

The Kasikorn Research Center (2010) also predicted that institutions in the higher education business would compete in terms of product differentiation in far more clearly defined areas of expertise within their own capabilities. For example, technology, engineering, business administration, or communication arts would promote themselves with their unique selling propositions. One of the relevant marketing perspectives for a university to achieve its enrollment objective would be to look at the view of the decision process (Simões & Soares, 2010). According to Kotler & Keller (2012), the consumer buying process entails five different stages, as presented in *Figure 1* below.

During Stage 2, the information search stage, consumers may actively find information by using various sources, including personal, commercial, public, or experiential sources (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Further research by Iacobucci, Shannon, & Grigoriou (2015) also simplified the purchase process into three distinctive stages, namely: 1) "pre-purchase"; 2) "purchase"; and 3) "post-purchase". The pre-purchase stage involves identifying the needs or wants, searching possible solutions, and building certain set considerations (Iacobucci, et al., 2015). Therefore, the "problem-recognition" or "pre-purchase" stage can be a very important stage for higher education as it is a very "high-cost, high-involvement product" (Franco, 2015; Gopalan, Pagiavlas, & Jones, 2008).

Consumer Buying Process

Stage 1 : Problem Recognition

Stage 2 : Information Search

Stage 3 : Evaluation of Alternatives

Stage 4 : Purchase Decision

Stage 5 : Postpurchase Behavior

Figure 1: Five-Stage Model of the Consumer Buying Process
Source: Kotler & Keller (2012)

High-involvement buying decisions often require an immense need of pre-purchase detailed information, because they involve very significant purchases where consumers feel a greater risk if the products do not perform precisely as they had initially expected (Hunt & Mello, 2015). Furthermore, Aaker (2004, 2011) created the Brand Relevance Model in the context of consumer-brand interaction, as illustrated in *Figure 2* below, when consumers tend to select a specific category/sub-category and then identify a set of relevant brands to consider. The main challenges for a private university is how to manage its visibility when a prospective student is in search for some detailed study information – and also how to become one of the universities in the student's consideration mind-set for either their undergraduate or postgraduate program of choice.
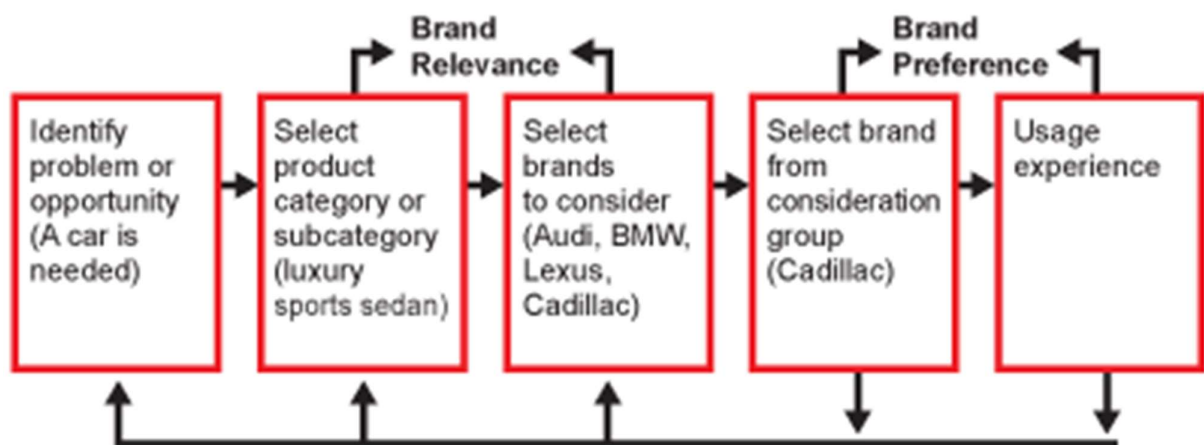

Figure 2: Consumer-Brand Interaction.
Source: Aaker (2004)

Simões & Soares (2010) discovered in their research results that, among marketer-controlled materials, the 'university website' was the most used information source when potential students evaluate a university to attend, whilst inter-personal sources ('former/current university students' and 'teachers') and the third-party independent information sources ('media/publicity' and 'secondary school counsellors') were mentioned by some students as the most commonly used sources. Kitsawad (2013), also found that high school students looked for information from websites, at exhibition booths, and campus visits by themselves. Nonetheless, Teerakul, Kaewsomboon, Sengseedam, Deeyai, & Watthanamathawee (2013) revealed that graduate students from different education levels had different opinions about public relations and promotion factors when deciding to enroll for their post-graduate studies.

2. Methodology

The main objective of this paper was to identify the main sources of information that prospective students used to seek relevant information about private universities, in order to make a definite tertiary education degree choice. Further, this study explored and discussed the differences between the main information sources used and the first channels of contact for undergraduate and postgraduate prospective students for future use by private higher education institutions in Thailand.

All the research data was collected in July 2016 from 400 respondents who had applied to one private university in Thailand. This methodology was undertaken in order to reach out to the prospective students of the university based on the list of applicants, as this approach covered a relatively short period of time and was far less costly than what face-to-face interviews would have created (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013; Wilson, 2014; Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2013). The applicants had agreed to participate in a telephone interview for the study. The two main questions that were asked were the following:

1. Sources of awareness: *"How did you hear about the university?"* (Multiple answers).
2. First channel of contact: *"How did you first get in contact with the university?"* (Single answer).

In addition to this, pre-listed answer choices to each question were developed and coded for the telephone interviews, which were based on the university's available sources of awareness and channels of contact. Any of the respondents' answers that did not fit in with the initial list were also recorded and analyzed.

In order to understand the differences between the undergraduate and postgraduate groups, an equal quota (50:50) was determined for the total sample. To explore the differences in the sources of awareness and the first chosen channel of contact that were used between the two groups of the education level of interest, (i.e. the undergraduate or postgraduate), the column proportion technique was used, to test the differences between the two category data proportions. The two category groups were then tested with the Z-test to identify the differences of the proportions when the sample size was 30 or higher and the T-test was used when the sample size was less than 30 (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2013).

3. Key Findings

The primary sources of the university's awareness, as depicted in *Table 1* below, shows that the "search/browse the Internet" seemed to be the most significant source of awareness of the university in general for all the candidates who were interviewed, at 55.5 percent. The second and third most mentioned sources were "the university provided information at my school" at 31.5 percent, and "recommendation from family members/relatives/friends/fellow students" at

22.5 percent among the total sample of 400 responses. However, some interesting differences in the key sources that were used between the prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students were also identified.

Table 1: Sources of the University's Awareness*

| | Total | Education Level of Interest | |
		Undergraduate (A)	Postgraduate (B)
QUESTION: "How did you hear about the university?"			
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	400	200	200
SOURCES OF AWARENESS	%	%	%
Search / browse the Internet	55.5	42.0	69.0 A
Online advertisement	14.5	13.0	16.0
Social media	18.0	11.0	25.0 A
Recommendation from family members / relatives / friends / fellow students	22.5	17.0	28.0 A
Recommendation from school / teachers	3.3	6.0 B	0.5
Recommendation from the alumni / professors / students at the university	5.5	6.5	4.5
Recommendation from education agent / consultant	1.0	2.0 B	-
The university provided information at my school	31.5	62.0 B	1.0
The university's open house activity	4.5	5.0	4.0
The university's English camp activity	1.0	1.5	0.5
Other events / activities by the university	3.5	1.0	6.0 A
I live / work near the campus	7.8	3.5	12.0 A
The university's advertisement – TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards etc.	5.8	3.5	8.0
Others	1.0	1.0	1.0

*The respondents could provide multiple answers. The final percentage numbers were calculated and rounded up to single decimal numbers. Therefore, a sum of percentage numbers in each column is greater than 100. "Others" included "guidance information at school" and "direct inquiry / direct application at the university".

Amongst the undergraduate prospective students, the most frequently mentioned source of awareness of the university was nonetheless: "the university provided information at my school" at 62.0 percent and was significantly different from that of the postgraduate prospective group, which reached 95 percent confidence level. The "search/browse the Internet" became second at 42.0 percent, followed by: "recommendation from family members/relatives/friends/fellow students" at 17.0 percent.

The sources of awareness among the postgraduate prospective students also had some different characteristics. In consistence with the total sample, the most mentioned source of awareness from the postgraduate prospects was: "search/browse the Internet" at 69.0 percent and was significantly different from that of the undergraduate prospective group, which was 95 percent confidence level. Nevertheless, the next two most frequently mentioned sources were: "recommendation from family members/relatives/friends/fellow students" at 28.0 percent and "social media" at 25.0 percent, both of which were significantly different from those of the undergraduate prospective group, at 95 percent confidence level.

Table 2: First Channels of Contact with the University*

	Total	Education Level of Interest	
		Undergraduate (A)	Postgraduate (B)
QUESTION: "How did you first get in contact with the university?" NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	400	200	200
FIRST CHANNEL OF CONTACT	%	%	%
I looked up the university's website	38.5	27.0	50.0 A
I came to the campus to contact the university by myself	9.3	6.5	12.0
I sent message to the university via telelphone (such as SMS or LINE)	2.0	2.0	2.0
I made an inquiry via the university's website	0.5	0.5	0.5
I made an inquiry via the university's social media channels (such as Facebook)	4.3	2.0	6.5 A
I sent email to the university staff	3.3	-	6.5 A
I called to the university staff	10.0	6.0	14.0 A
I attended the university's presentation	0.8	1.0	0.5
I attended the university's open house activity	1.0	1.5	0.5
I attended the university events with students, alumni, faculty or university representatives	1.3	2.5 B	-
I visited the university campus for classroom introduction or campus tour	2.0	3.0	1.0
I attended the school visit activity with the university	24.0	47.5 B	0.5
I attended the office visit activity with the university	0.5	-	1.0
I visited the admission booth from the university	0.3	-	0.5
I attended other events/activities organized by the university	2.0	-	4.0 A
The university contacted me by phone	0.5	0.5	0.5

*Each of the respondents could provide only one answer. The percentage numbers were calculated and rounded up to single decimal numbers. Therefore, a sum of percentage numbers in the "Total" column is slightly greater than 100.

The results in *Table 2* shows further findings when regarding the second main question to understand the first channel of contact with the university that was used among prospective students. Overall, the top-three most frequently mentioned channels from the total sample offered were these: 1) "I looked up the university's website" (38.5 percent); 2) "I attended the school visit activity with the university" (24.0 percent); and 3) "I called the university staff" (10.0 percent). When looking at each undergraduate or postgraduate prospective group, however, there were also differences in the first channel of contact that was used.

For the undergraduate prospects' the most frequently mentioned channel was: "I attended the school visit activity with the university" (47.5 percent) which was significantly different from that of the postgraduate prospective group, which reached 95 percent confidence level. The university's website was also the second most mentioned channel by undergraduate prospects (27.0 percent). On the other hand, the most frequently mentioned first channel among the postgraduate prospective students was: "I looked up the university's website" (50.0 percent), followed by "I called to the university staff" (14.0 percent). Both were significantly different from that of the undergraduate prospective group, being at 95 percent confidence level.

4. Conclusion & Suggestions

From the findings regarding the sources of awareness that were used, the prospective undergraduate students who were interviewed still relied on information from personal sources via universities' school visits and their membership groups, including family and friends, which is in line with the groups of information sources described by Kotler & Keller (2012). However, simultaneously, they still sought for information from commercial sources via an online search. Amongst the prospective postgraduate students, the major source of information would be commercial sources by searching/browsing the Internet to find appropriate university choices for them. The research results showed that they also looked for information from family and friends to a much lesser extent when compared to what the undergraduate prospects undertook. The results of both the sources of awareness and the first contact channel that was used, pointed out a difference from previous research undertaken by Simões & Soares (2010) where the 'university website' was ranked as the most commonly used information source when specifically comparing only undergraduate prospective students.

The key findings of this research project suggests that, in order to become effective in a prospective student's consideration mind-set, especially during the pre-purchase/pre-enrollment decision process stage, the private higher education institutions in Thailand should emphasize the right channels or touch-points that are the most relevant to each target group. This will enable them to become both effective and efficient to become a successful recruiter of future students, for both undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs on offer.

To gain attention and awareness from prospective undergraduate students, private universities should create prominent communication messages with a relevant value proposition via the high school visiting activities. As such, the well-trained university promoters and suitable marketing materials, with attractive designs and compelling messages, and interesting on-site school activities will be able to attract the immediate attention of prospective students, so these areas are highly recommended to be implemented for future recruitment. For both prospective undergraduate and postgraduate groups, the private higher education institutions should focus on and invest in its online presence. Lastly, to draw more attention from postgraduate prospects in particular, the private universities in Thailand should also focus on promoting recommendations from family and friends who are alumni or present students, in parallel with their online marketing programs.

It must be noted that this research study still holds a generalizability limitation in its nature of an exploratory study (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013) by using just one private university in Thailand. However, regardless of that, it directionally explored several effective ways for the university to reach prospective students seeking either an undergraduate or postgraduate degree program in Thailand's context.

As such, the study results also suggests some very plausible possibilities for the future investigation and discussions about online marketing and school partnership strategies which could enable the university's ability to enhance the awareness and consideration of the private universities in Thailand, or other market areas with a similar construct.

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