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University social responsibility and brand image of private universities in Bangkok

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of university social responsibility (USR) on the brand image of private universities in Thailand. Brand image is important for entry into the consideration set as prospective students evaluate options for university study. USR activities may be implicit or explicit, i.e., actively communicated to external stakeholders. The authors show that explicit USR can help put a university into the brand consideration set.

Design/methodology/approach – This pilot research uses qualitative interviews to explore perceptions of six private university executives, six M6 (high school) students, and the parents of the M6 students.

Findings – In Thailand, some USR elements are mandated components of quality assurance (QA), but many universities go beyond basic requirements. The university executives talked about USR beyond simply meeting government QA requirements. USR can contribute to competitiveness and it helps produce better, more socially responsible graduates. Communication about USR is done through both online and traditional media, but public knowledge lags somewhat compared to what universities actually do. M6 students are more aware of university USR activities than their parents because of online media and university roadshows at their schools. USR is not the major factor in choosing a university, and many activities are not well-known. However, students and parents think that USR is helpful, and some activities directly impact inclusion in the brand consideration set.

Practical implications – Universities can apply these USR activities to strengthen their brand images and become part of the consideration set. However, they need more careful marketing communications to fully inform stakeholders about the whole range of USR.

Originality/value – The researchers have examined how private Thai universities use USR activities as a part of government mandated QA components. These USR activities can contribute to their brand image and help move the university into the brand consideration set.

Keywords Brand image, Marketing communications, Thailand,
Corporate social responsibility (CSR), Brand consideration set, University social responsibility (USR)

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Modern secondary students are very alert to information for their decisions on which university to attend, and the students and their parents use a considerable amount of information to make their decisions from more informed choices (Moogan, 2011).

The decision process takes a long time, as they consider many factors which may differ from student to student. The problem is how to find the right university that suits their needs, from among too many to fully evaluate all of them completely. Prospective students may form brand consideration sets (Kardes *et al.*, 1993). In situations where there are a great many brands, consumers cannot examine all brands in detail, so they tend to focus on ones that seem to be most appropriate (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006). Universities which can differentiate themselves by creating strong brand images are recognized by prospective students during the decision process, and become one of those students and parents investigate in detail.

Corporate societal marketing programs can play an important role in brand image (Hoeffler and Keller, 2002). Many businesses are increasingly aware of the need to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR); not only is doing good the right thing to do, but it can also enhance performance through its positive effects on key stakeholders (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). The heart of the CSR idea reflects social needs and is related to business success (Matten and Moon, 2008). Carroll (1999) demonstrated that the CSR concept is an important part of the business in a range of theoretical frameworks, and it is relevant to what the public expects the business to do for the community.

The university is a part of society which aims to create new knowledge and train people to contribute to society. Almost by definition, one of the university's primary roles is providing CSR activities, e.g., academic services to society. If the university shows leadership in CSR, the brand image of the university can be enhanced among all stakeholders, and this can result in the university being included in the brand consideration set. This research examines CSR in terms of university social responsibility (USR) in private Thai universities. Universities are a high-involvement service in Thailand, in terms of how much time and effort are required in decision making, and the amount of information needed before purchase (Pinkaeo and Speece, 2001). But, as noted, people do not evaluate all universities when making this effort and getting detailed information. We investigate how private university administrators in Thailand view the role of USR in their marketing efforts, and whether prospective students and their parents see university USR as a useful component of brand image, which may lead them to include the university in their consideration sets.

The Private Higher Education Act legalized private higher education in 1969, with revisions in 2003 and 2007 (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2012). Three categories are often discussed: religious affiliated, "semi-elite," both of which begun to be established early on, and demand absorbing, which mostly came somewhat after the first two categories. Except for some of the specialized religion-affiliated universities, they have tended to converge somewhat in recent decades in terms of curriculum offered, but the "semi-elite" category does tend to offer a more comprehensive range of programs, beyond just higher demand programs aimed at the job market, and they tend to encourage more research, as opposed to purely teaching (Praphamontripong, 2008; ADB, 2012).

The status of Thai private universities is non-profit organizations. The Thai government seems thoroughly uninterested in allowing the category of for-profit private demand-absorbing universities which Levy (2007) calls "profit-making garage institutions." Nevertheless, similar to profit-oriented businesses, non-profit private universities must survive on their own. The Thai government does provide some scholarships which can be used for private universities, but otherwise there is little government support. Therefore, the tuition fee of private Thai universities is often more expensive than the public ones, especially among those in the semi-elite category,

and private universities are often at a disadvantage in terms of price. While they may have programs that a prospective student would find attractive if the student actually evaluates the university in some detail, not all universities get careful consideration. Brand image is important for helping private universities gain entry to the brand consideration set.

The higher education system in Thailand is strongly centralized. The Thai Government attempts to enforce uniform minimum quality assurance (QA) standards on all, whether private or public, and it expects all universities to make at least some minimal contribution to society. (Levy, 2007 notes that East/Southeast Asia and the Middle East in general are less likely to demonstrate the lax regulatory environment for private education characteristic of some parts of the world.) A number of USR elements are part of the QA assessment of universities, and QA measurements include measures of USR from several angles. The private Thai university must pass minimum QA standards to remain accredited, and must do at least enough USR to satisfy government standards on the USR elements (Kanjanapanyakom, 2011; ADB, 2012). However, given the need for strong brand image (especially for the "semi-elite" private universities) to attract potential students, many go beyond simply minimally meeting the USR standards. Exceeding USR standards can become part of their effort to build brand image.

Thus, this research examines how USR and communicating about USR contributes to formation of the brand image, which facilitates entry into the brand consideration set as future customers begin evaluating brands. We examine the issue both from the viewpoint of private university administrators, and from the view of prospective students and their parents.

CSR and USR
CSR is not easy to define. Matten and Moon (2008), for example, demonstrated that there is considerable literature on CSR and related concepts, but it is still not easy to pin down the exact CSR definition. However, the core idea of CSR is that it reflects the social responses and the social consequences of business success. West *et al.* (2010, p. 454) concluded that "CSR is the actions of the company to act in a socially responsible manner to protect and enhance the various stakeholders that have an interest in the company, the community in which it operates, the environment which surrounds it, and society."

The university sector considers CSR as a duty. The university provides long-term services to students, with complex relationships to multiple parties such as parents, instructors, industries, professional institutes, government, and alumni (Moogan, 2011). Thus, the CSR concept involving all stakeholders has much the same meaning for university responsibility as it does for companies.

USR, university management, and student as "customer"
For business, CSR activities are largely voluntary and may not be directly involved in offering products and services. However, in some countries such as Thailand, university management engages in CSR to meet the criteria of university QA. This has a direct impact on primary stakeholders, as well as indirect impact on all stakeholders through creating social benefits. Some CSR activities of the universities are the same as CSR activities done by businesses, and as in a business context, USR activities can generate favorable impressions among customers.

Many universities consider prospective and admitted students as "customers" because they directly increase university revenue. "Marketization" of higher education is a growing trend (Natale and Doran, 2012), and without much State support, private universities are particularly susceptible. University competition leads to management by customer orientation and operation process in order to satisfy their customers (Watjatrakul, 2014). Students (and their parents), of course, have multiple roles in their relationship to the university (e.g. Maringe, 2005), and "student as customer" is only one of the current conceptualizations and identities. However, it is useful for the purposes of attracting students, as marketing is essentially about attracting and satisfying customers through customer orientation.

Maringe (2005) acknowledges worries about viewing students as customers, but shows that "customer orientation" does not automatically involve dramatic shift of power to customers. Modern thinking has more of a societal marketing philosophy, with a broader stakeholder orientation. "Essentially, the societal concept calls for universities to be ethical and to embrace a social responsibility consciousness that rejects the idea of pushing products and services at any cost" (Maringe, 2005, p. 568). Among other inducements to keep quality up, in this concept the fees paid by students lead them to compare the value of money. Value declines if quality is insufficient, and they may choose another institution if they do not agree that the quality meets their standards. This can have impact on the university's bottom line (Scott *et al.*, 2008).

The more forward-looking universities understand that customer orientation includes careful attention to quality, not simply pulling in "customers" and catering to student whims. The basis for quality is still about university capabilities; and "the academic standard of a management institute depends on parameters like faculty profiles, flexibility in curriculum design and dynamism of curriculum with respect to the external environment" (Mahajan *et al.*, 2014, p. 383). Furthermore, the ability of academic leaders is a key factor in fostering quality, so that the university can create and apply knowledge toward social and economic progress (Hamidifar, 2014). Even many students view the "student as customer" concept as being about quality. Watjatrakul (2014), for example, shows that Thai students feel that "student as customer" can improve quality, and do not support an approach that simply makes passing courses very easy. (This author teaches at one of the Thai "semi-elite" private universities, where the study was probably conducted.)

Narrow and broad USR
According to Schwartz and Carroll (2008) there are two major schools of thought in defining CSR: first, narrow CSR is the responsibility of business to make profits within the law; and second, the broader definition covers the responsibility for providing benefits to wider society on a voluntary basis. For universities, narrow USR focusses on good quality services to the primary stakeholders, in order to attract student who want a good education, and keep employees who want a good working environment. It is not very concerned with benefits to the broader society. The primary goal is to find the best services to the students, as well as to attend to the quality work life of the employees.

This can be the first step to more complete CSR, but it is not full CSR to most observers. The broad USR tends to involve showing corporate citizenship to get public admiration. Sheikh and Beise-Zee (2011), for example, argue that holistic strategy CSR would equal good citizenship in broad terms, being a good company to serve society as a whole as well as shareholders or direct stakeholders. The broad definition includes the narrow issues, thus, the university should do both narrow and broad USR together.

Implicit and explicit USR

Matten and Moon (2008) categorized CSR into implicit and explicit CSR. First, implicit CSR refers to the corporation's role within the wider formal and informal institutions for society's interests and concerns. It normally consists of values, norms, and rules that result in requirements for corporations to address stakeholder issues, and that define proper obligations of corporate actors in collective rather than individual terms. Second, explicit CSR uses the language of CSR in communicating the corporation's policies and practices to stakeholders. Many universities conduct USR activities for their internal stakeholders, and they are especially aware that students can gain knowledge and experience about good USR activities to promote their beneficial and healthy lifestyles (Ahmad, 2012).

The explicit USR usually comes from a deliberate strategic planning process such as offering CSR courses to their students and promoting their explicit USR activities to their local communities (Atakan and Eker, 2007). Therefore, explicit USR tends to be associated with higher education marketing. From the education marketing point of view, universities should select broad USR and explicit activities to create concrete benefits and communicate to all stakeholders. Higher education marketing has encouraged students to be involved in university-related activities to promote the prestige of the university, and students will donate to the university in the future (Amett *et al.*, 2003).

Actual USR

The ultimate objective of all universities is to improve and develop society in the long run, which is also the purpose of USR. Students are important, and university executives who use customer orientation must provide students with a challenging and quality education so that students can make themselves successful in their careers and then contribute to their communities (Pesch *et al.*, 2008). For Thai higher education, the actual USR activities are followed according to mandated university QA (Office of the Higher Education Commission, Ministry of Education (OHEC), 2014).

The Office of the Higher Education Commission in Thailand established mandatory internal QA systems which consists of nine components: philosophy commitments, objectives and implementation plan; graduate production; student development activities; research; academic services to the community; preservation of arts and culture; administration and management; finance and budgeting; and system and mechanism for quality (OHEC, 2014). However, the universities can do USR either in the relatively narrow or the broad way, and can do USR in implicit or explicit ways.

The university may implement USR in activities related to instructors, students, and other staff. First, they can provide USR in the curriculum and train the students and stakeholders to be USR experts. Second, they can organize USR activities to involve their students in interaction with society; for example, with volunteer camp projects, volunteer academic projects, etc. Such USR activities are directly helpful for the students, and society will benefit both directly and indirectly. Third, the universities can collaborate with other universities to build their academic network for such USR. Finally, universities can provide joint activities with charity foundations or businesses.

Communication about USR

Explicit USR needs to be communicated to all stakeholders, but exactly how is still not completely understood (McDonald and Rundle-Thiele, 2008). Many universities aim to

enhance their reputation by improving academic programs and supporting faculty research efforts, which help the universities recruit students and faculty members as well as increase donations (Amett *et al.*, 2003). USR can contribute to these efforts, but needs to be communicated to work well. Universities must be aware of the different of types of controllable communication such as traditional media communication and websites, as well as non-controllable communication such as word-of-mouth and media commentary (Balmer and Greyser, 2002).

Durkin *et al.* (2012) concluded that there were two targets for university communications: people such as school teachers and family members, who are decision influencers, and the actual potential end-customers such as the future university students. Because these two target audiences have somewhat different media usage patterns, USR communications may need to go through different channels: first, traditional communication media such as advertising (on TV, radio, sign board), sponsorship, public relations; and second, online media such as websites, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube. The 16-24 age group is among the most active on the internet, whereas the lowest internet users are aged 65 and over (Abbey and Hyde, 2009). Actually, potential students also rely on a range of information from the university, such as university open days, university websites (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004).

Further, university education is a high-involvement service where potential customers would want fairly extensive information, but not all necessarily actively search for information (e.g. Brennan, 2001; Pinkaeo and Speece, 2001; Menon, 2004; Menon *et al.*, 2007). In another high-involvement service context, health care, the more health-conscious consumers utilize active information search extensively. However, somewhat less health-conscious consumers are more likely to passively consume information through TV and radio, rather than actively search for it (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Most research on information search among prospective university students does not explicitly distinguish between early in the process, vs later, when search strategies may shift from passive to active.

Brand image of universities

In general, one important objective of CSR strategies is to gain competitive advantage (Du *et al.*, 2011). Marketing communications help create brand image. A strong brand image can make it easy for consumers to see that the brand satisfies their needs, so it differentiates the brand from its competitors, and increases the likelihood of purchase by customers (Hsieh *et al.*, 2004). Higher education institutions can build strong brands by continuously expressing their unique strengths and virtues (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009). CSR activities can be some of these unique strengths and virtues, and thus, a major part of the university brand image. Brand image is a representation of a business's competencies, including CSR, which can be used to appeal to all stakeholders (Popoli, 2011).

As noted above, university education is a high-involvement service in Thailand (Pinkaeo and Speece 2001). High-involvement products/services, such as education, may not have frequent repurchase, but they can have substantial word-of-mouth, which is supported by brand image. Bart *et al.* (2005) stated that brand strength is crucial for high-involvement products/services, and that recommendations are a strong factor for search good categories with high-financial risk. CSR activities do have an impact on brand image, as has been shown, e.g., for financial services in Thailand (Poolthong and Mandhachitara, 2009). Thus, the university needs to use USR to help

create a strong brand image, but branding is not usually easy for all universities (Chapleo *et al.*, 2011).

Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) confirm that new universities need to build strong brands in order to: first, create market awareness among their potential students, including through their parents and careers advisors; second, improve their ability to recruit high quality scholars and administrators; third, differentiate from rival universities; and fourth, gain market share. In this perspective, the private university is in a somewhat difficult situation because of the price. In Thailand, the perspective students also compare with the higher status and cheaper public universities, so creating the brand image is essential for the private university's survival in the long run.

USR, brand image, and brand consideration sets
University choice is a complex decision, not determined by just one or a few components. Students may need a considerable amount of information about the university before the final decision, and they may use a long time to find and process information, and then to decide. Most customers use brand image to help in the initial stages of their search. Several universities may have good brand images, which, even though somewhat different, are equally attractive. Some may have brand images which make them seem not appropriate for the consumer. In general, there is little point in spending the time and effort to find information about universities that are not appropriate.

Of course, high-involvement products/services are not bought simply because of brand image. Rather, a favorable brand image gets the university into the consideration set, i.e., it becomes one of those which merit further investigation. Consumers suffer from information overload, and the consideration set is one tactic they use to deal with this (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006). "The consideration set consists of the pool of brands from which choice is made" (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006, p. 340). Consumers "adopt a two-stage screening process leading to choice, that is, consideration set formation followed by brand evaluation from the consideration set leading to choice" (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006, p. 340).

Certainly there are many universities in Thailand, and consumers will not evaluate them all. Brand image of the university is one factor that can appeal to potential customers so that they include the university in the consideration set. Therefore, "marketers in the area of higher education service should realize that developing a positive brand image is more important than creating awareness" (Mourad *et al.*, 2011, p. 415). Brand image is information that helps a university gain inclusion in the brand consideration set.

The university is a high-involvement service because most students decide on a university once in their life time. Therefore, an important step in the decision process is to form the consideration set, from which they can evaluate possible alternatives. The brand image of each private Thai university influences the prospective students to include the university (or not include it) in the brand consideration set. However, this initial decision comes early in the decision process, and, by definition, before there is extensive information search. Thus, most information that is used for including a university in the consideration set is likely to have been passively acquired.

Methodology
This research used qualitative in-depth interviews among two groups: university executives and university customers. While there a substantial amount of research on brand image, and some on how CSR activities can contribute to it, there is not much work in the context of USR, university brand image, and brand consideration sets.

This suggests a qualitative in-depth approach. Qualitative approaches can provide a lot of detail about respondents' thinking in early stages of research, and help the researcher understand the issues more deeply (Srijumpa *et al.*, 2004; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Further, there has not been much application of any of these concepts in Thailand. In cross-cultural work, the first step in any research must be thorough understanding of concepts in their cultural context. This comes from careful qualitative work that examines respondents' thinking in depth (e.g. Malhotra *et al.*, 1996; Douglas and Nijssen, 2003; Srijumpa *et al.*, 2004).

The respondents in the first group are six private university executives in Bangkok, from among 21 private universities in Bangkok. These six universities are among those with good to very good QA scores on the government mandated USR quality standards, and they are also among the most active in communicating about their USR. (In practice, these are mostly the "semi-elite" category noted above.) The set of private universities meeting these criteria is not very large to begin with, and is further restricted because we also aimed for a range of sizes. Two of the universities are among the largest private universities, three are medium sized, and one is smaller. Within these parameters, we also considered access; which is often critical in getting useful information out of large organizations in any context (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 52). In the Asian business environment, it is often necessary to use connections to get much data from organizations (e.g. Srijumpa *et al.*, 2004).

The customer group includes both students and their parents. Future students of private universities in Bangkok will come from Muthyomsuksa 6 (M6 = high school final year). In Thai culture, parents of M6 students pay for their children's education until they graduate from universities, so parents are important decision influencers and were also interviewed. Six M6 students and six parents of M6 students in Bangkok were chosen by convenience basis, targeting middle class. The students come from four public and two private schools. There are three male and three female students, 17-18 years old, and 1,000-5,000 Baht monthly personal spending. The parents have a variety of careers such as government officer, state enterprise officer, entrepreneur, and private employee. Three male and three female parents were interviewed, 45-60 years old, and 20,000-35,000 Baht monthly consumption. Many market research firms define middle class as monthly household income of approximately 20,000 Baht or more (e.g. Larpsiri and Speece, 2004).

The instruments for the research are two lists of open-ended questions, each list oriented toward either the university executives or the potential customers. The questions for university executives asked them to describe actual USR at their universities, communication about USR, and brand image. The questions for the potential customers asked them to describe brand images of private universities, their brand consideration set, marketing communications of the universities that tlhey were aware of, and USR of the universities. A semi-structured format was used in the interviews, which was guided by the lists of topics. However, respondents could freely express their opinions, and were encouraged to talk about issues as they came up, so discussion did not necessarily follow order on the list. Probing was often used to get at additional depth (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, Chapter 7).

Findings

The research findings are discussed in two parts: first, the USR activities and the efforts to build brand image are initiated by the university executives, and they have a detailed view of what the universities do; and second, the perceptions of the brand image, including knowledge of university USR, are from the M6 students and their parents.

USR and the brand image of private Thai universities
The ministry of education in Thailand enacts USR as a duty, and USR is specified as part of the QA components. QA standards 4, 5, and 6 are specifically about academic services to the community, but the scores on all other QA components also include implementing USR activities. Other QA standards can be partially met by involvement in USR activities depending upon the level of the USR strategies of each university. Table I summarizes the details of the USR activities in each of the QA components.

In addition to the genuine concern about their universities contributing to society, the executives are well aware that USR can contribute to their brand image:

> USR affects the university image and reputation in the market.

> USR helps the university to contribute clear university reputation.

All the executives mentioned that USR is a duty, but some refer to their USR activities as being linked to the whole set of QA components, from 1 to 9, while others consider

QA no.	QA components	Involving USR activities
1	Philosophy, commitments, objectives, and implementation plans	(1) Having operation plans for conducting research studies, providing academic service, and preserving arts and culture
2	Graduate production (teaching and learning)	(1) Having professionals from external organizations or the community participate in the teaching and learning process (2) There are students and/or student activities which receive ethics awards from outside organization
3	Student development activities	(1) Having USR projects/activities to allow students and other stakeholders such as alumni or communities to participate (2) Encouraging building the networks between the university and other institutions
4	Research	(1) Encouraging doing research that is useful to society and publicizing it to the society
5	Academic services to the community	(1) Integrating academic services activities with teaching and learning (2) Having cooperation with other organizations in providing academic services (3) Publicizing the knowledge of academic services to the community
6	Preservation of arts and culture	(1) Integrating the preservation of arts and culture into teaching and learning as well as into student activities (2) Publicizing the preservation of arts and culture activities
7	Administration and management	(1) Implementing good governance, risk management in order to address concerns for all stakeholders (2) Having effective human resources system and mechanism for developing quality of all work in the university
8	Finance and budgeting	(1) Having guidelines for efficient, transparent and verifiable finance and budgeting processes (2) Having internal and external sharing of resources
9	System and mechanism for quality assurance	(1) Stakeholders – especially students, employers of graduates, and service recipients according to the institutional missions – participate in the educational quality process (2) Having a network for QA activities with other universities

Source: OHEC (2014)

Table I.
The details of the USR activities in the QA components

that their USR activities are linked to 1 through 6 among the QA components in Table I. In addition, the private universities also adopt USR activities on their own, even if they do not obviously link to elements in the QA components. One example cited was building programs which imitate USA-style university education, to see if such programs can better serve students and turn out students who can better serve society. One university executive said that:

> […] the university uses USR strategically to contribute to four duties: producing graduates, doing research, academic services to the community, and preservation of arts and culture.

There are many ways to implement USR activities to reach and benefit all stakeholders, especially local communities. The USR activities frequently mentioned include as follows:

(1) Philanthropy, which can help victims of various misfortunes or circumstances. For example, they have scholarships to support poor students, and they make donations to various causes.

(2) Sponsorship is used to support or collaborate with the other organizations that have a worthy cause, and it also contributes to brand awareness and brand image of the university.

(3) Academic service is used to provide academic opportunities to communities, by teaching special courses, or research to examine community problems.

(4) Scholarships are used to encourage M6 students who show promise academically, as well as to support development of some specific talents among M6 students, such as athletes, actors, and musicians.

The private universities interviewed all do these four types of USR, although the details of implementation may differ. In addition, the USR activities apply different degrees of implicit and explicit USR, depending on USR strategies and budgeting.

Implicit USR activities. Private universities have always done a number of USR activities internally, even before the government linked USR to the QA evaluations. Common ones include:

(1) student affairs division has volunteer camp activities, philanthropy club, Buddhism club, etc., which get students involved with society outside the university;

(2) faculties have created their own seminars and conferences, and research projects involved with community issues. Some faculties have provided various services, such as medical services, law consulting, small business consulting, etc.;

(3) executive management has welfare and scholarship policies for university staff; and

(4) stipends to support student clubs and student activities.

While many of these USR activities may have been done more or less continuously, now that they are linked to QA components, they have been institutionalized and are done continuously as a matter of policy. If the universities do such USR activities and communicate only to direct stakeholders, the activities are known only in narrow groups, but some universities communicate them more broadly. Either way, these USR

activities can build a sense of social responsibility in the minds of students, which contributes to the quality of university graduates.

Explicit USR activities. Explicit USR activities, i.e., wider communication about USR, seems to be more likely when some private universities go beyond the others in linking USR to all nine QA components, and explicitly aim to get higher QA scores. One part of this explicit use of USR in the QA assessment is expanding USR activities to more communities and to rural areas away from the immediate geographical proximity to the university. The explicit USR activities are created to fit with the university concept, and communicated to all stakeholders, including those who may not be directly involved with the university. Because they are supposed to be consistent with the university mission, most such USR activities are not substantially different from the ones just noted above, but they are carried out much more extensively. They include:

(1) Philanthropy – a wide range of activities to relieve suffering when there are specific issues, such as flood relief during Thailand's major floods in 2011. There are also ongoing efforts to help local development, often organized around volunteer camp activities, in which students attend camps to work on development projects. These may be combined with fundraising activities, such as when the university football club raises funds to support the projects. Fundraising also supports construction projects; a number of rural schools have been built by this kind of private university initiative.

(2) Philanthropy and academic service – many volunteer camps are combined with students' academic disciplines, and advanced students provide basic law consulting, basic medical services, small business consulting, etc.

(3) Philanthropy and collaboration with other organizations – e.g., one university collaborates with the Thai Chamber of Commerce and the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives. The project teaches farmers integrated farming methods, as well as things like personal finance, and uses some crop technologies developed in university research, to reduce farm inputs and help farmers manage cash flows, while raising farm output. Farmers are able to get out of debt and support families purely from farming. Student experts help the farmers in the project, and then farmers who have succeeded can teach other farmers.

(4) Scholarships – there is a wider range of scholarships, and more cooperation outside the university to offer them in collaboration with other organizations.

(5) Academic service – many private universities encourage their scholars to teach or introduce their knowledge to society on TV, radio, and newspapers, such as in TV talk shows (e.g. several university business talk shows), applied research published in the popular press (e.g. several regular university polls on key topics in Thai society), and networks for collaborations (e.g. many Memoranda of Understanding with provincial governments and other organizations to carry out research and service useful to society). Sometimes they set up organizations for specific purposes, such as the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum at Bangkok University (BU), which also publishes a newsletter about ceramics.

(6) Scholarship and academic service – scholarships explicitly tied to providing for academic service to society is rare. However, one private university gave a special scholarship to a poor student from a remote area from the north of

Thailand, who wanted to be a doctor in his home town. This was not a legal commitment by the student, but it came from the student's heart to be a doctor to help the poor rural people.

The universities in our sample all engage in such USR to bring benefits to society, as well as to give students experience in socially useful activities and develop their sense of social responsibility. They would like their students to develop "social responsibility habit" and "public mind." They all receive good feedback. One respondent mentioned that:

[…] doing USR activities are to respond the social needs and it helps the university to be sustainable.

The university executives believe that USR affects marketing, although there are slight differences in thinking about its exact role. One views its marketing role as public relations:

USR is useful to the society but mainly used for the public relations value. USR is good because it positively impacts to the involved stakeholders.

However, another thinks USR goes beyond PR:

USR affects a lot on university image, which [then] does not need to depend [so much] upon public relations.

Essentially, though, the university executives believe that USR activities affect the university brand image in the long run and help the university to be well-known. It helps potential customers focus on quality rather than price, where private universities are at a disadvantage:

University name seems to be related to price, but USR helps the university to get another point of view.

Student and parent perceptions of brand image of private Thai universities
None of the student or parent respondents expect to choose private universities as their first priority. Generally, Thai society believes public universities are higher quality, and, as well, private universities usually cost more. If they cannot pass the entrance exam, some of them apply to a private university. This is actually useful for our research purposes, since the M6 students had not taken entrance examinations yet, and thus, had rarely started much detailed information search about private universities. Most of what they know is based on passively acquired information, i.e., brand image.

Perceptions of M6 students. Most of the M6 student respondents selected Assumption University (AU) as a first priority if they were to go to a private university because of its well-known brand name, including recognition that the curriculum consists entirely of international programs (i.e. in Thailand, this means taught in English). AU has a broad general brand image based on its international curriculum, while the other universities are selected mainly for specific programs of the university. Most commonly, the M6 students selected BU and Rangsit University (RU) as the second priority. BU is known for its business and mass communication programs; while RU is known for its medical and dental programs.

Other universities that came up are University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC), Dhurakij Pundit University (DPU), Kasem Bundit University (KBU), Sripatum University (SPU), Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (HCU), and Siam University (SU).

Most of them are known for business and economics programs; UTCC is famous specifically for its accounting and finance programs. KBU and SU are known for good engineering programs; while HCU is known for programs in alternative medicine (Chinese medicine).

Perceptions of parents of M6 students. Most of the parents of the M6 students also selected AU as a first priority because of the well-known brand image for international programs. The other universities were also selected based the dominant programs of the university, and did not differ much from what students said. Most parents selected BU as second priority for its business and mass communication programs. After that, RU was the most selected, and parents also know it particularly for the medical and dental programs. Other selected universities were UTCC, DPU, and SPU, as noted, mostly because parents know about their business and economics programs. Again, UTCC is known specifically for its accounting and finance programs. As can be seen, the parents mentioned a slightly smaller set of universities than did the students.

Image of USR of private universities in Bangkok
Both the M6 students and their parents know that the private universities engage in USR, but sometimes they do not recognize those events. All of them think that the USR activities with other organizations are necessary to have a good reputation, but nearly all of the respondents found it hard remember many specific USR activities other than ones related to their own particular interests. But most M6 students and their parents think that the university needs to do USR activities and will suffer if it does not implement them. A number of comments illustrated this, showing impact from simple awareness to brand image:

It is a silent university.

The university is not well known.

University does not create its image.

Notably, "unknown" translates into negative perceptions:

The university looks bad.

Most of the M6 students receive information about the USR activities from online media, and they are interested in many things related to those USR activities, particularly various scholarships for future students. They mentioned a number of specific scholarships, for placing well in contests for innovations, for good academic performance, for excelling in the examinations, for athletes, etc. They also noted some related academic services for M6 students, including tutoring for entrance examinations. Sometimes they are aware of sponsorships for some activities in their M6 schools.

Most of the parents receive the USR activities information from TV, newspapers, word-of-mouth, and seeing the USR activities by themselves. They note particularly the private USR activities about scholarships for future students, and academic seminars. They also know about university polls, university economic news, and volunteer camps. However, they are interested primarily in the quality of graduates from the schools, and can judge because they often meet a graduate among their family members, their friends, and colleagues.

Communication channels. The M6 students and their parents receive private universities information mainly from four ways: traditional media, online media,

university events, and word-of-mouth. Among traditional media, M6 students are most likely to notice private university information on TV, signboards, and newspapers. This is mostly when they are passive, not actively looking for information. They do not use traditional media much for active information search. Usually M6 students would get university information from social media, especially Facebook, and from other social media such as SMS, Twitter, Instagram, etc. They also frequently search for information on universities from Dek-D.com (a popular Thai social site for teenagers), because they feel it has complete information on universities. If they want more specific information, they search university websites.

Parents pay more attention to traditional media such as TV, signboard, and newspapers, even when actively looking for information. Most parents are not interested in online media, so for them it is not a very good communications channel when they are not actively looking for information. However, they may use online sources when actively looking. Some would search for information from Dek-D.com and directly search university websites if they were interested in the university. For example, one parent said that:

> If I am interested in what [programs are at the] university I will find at that university website.

The universities also have roadshows the M6 schools. This activity is crucial because M6 students directly receive the private universities information. In addition, the private universities hold educational exhibitions at department stores in the heart of the city, at places which are popular among M6 students. Furthermore, the M6 students receive university information from word-of-mouth of school alumni who have become freshmen of those universities. Some word-of-mouth also comes from their parents and family members. One student said:

> I met the school alumni who introduced one private university on its road show at my school.

University roadshows and cooperation with secondary schools are very effective ways to engage with students. At least, the USR activities lead the M6 students and (indirectly) their parents to participate in the university programs. Scholarship information generates a lot of interest. One student said that:

> I took the exam for a scholarship from one private university at my school.

Another student said that:

> I know that my school has announced the scholarships from one private university.

In addition, students do pay attention to programs, especially those interested in specialized programs not widely available. For example, one student said that:

> I am rather interested in the Chinese medicine from the road show.

Mostly, the parents of the M6 students ignore the private university roadshows and educational exhibitions, although they know about these from their children. However, the parents do receive university information from word-of-mouth from their family members and their friends. This information from word-of-mouth is most credible to them, and can prove that the universities are good quality.

Thus, for the communication about USR to work well, not only must it contain information about the USR activities which are useful to the potential customers, but also the communication about USR should select the right media. For example, the M6

students always are interested in Dek-D. Occasionally parents try to keep up with what their kids do online; one parent mentioned that "I applied for SMS from Dek-D.com as a member."

Whatever channel the information comes from, if students are interested in private universities from which they may receive and accept this information, the university names get into the consideration set. The brand consideration set will prompt search for more information when the students need to apply to the private universities.

Explicit USR and brand image
Explicit USR activities become important marketing tools. Once students are aware and gain a favorable impression, the university enters the consideration set and students follow up with active information search:

> I once went to open house at one university and I am interested in its scholarship, so I visit to this university website in order to follow this scholarship information.

> I know the admissions tutoring at one private university from Dek-D.com and I think that this strategy is useful because the students will directly enter and see the facility and environment of the university.

Moreover one parent said that:

> I often listen an economic poll from the private university and I also remember [scholar name] who moderates this poll.

Thus, each private Thai university creates a variety of USR activities that are worthwhile to society. Then, they may aim for these USR activities to become outstanding and gain recognition, and they use marketing communication about USR. However, not all USR activities seem to make a big impact on brand image among prospective customers; most of the perception of M6 students seems oriented toward those USR activities that have a direct impact on them, such as scholarships and some academic services they can use. The parents may know something about the USR activities indirectly through graduates among their family, friends, and colleagues, and they do pay attention to university discussions and polls on topics of interest to them. Thus, the impact of actual USR on brand image seems mixed – some activities get noticed, but awareness of USR efforts overall is somewhat weak.

Discussion
All private Thai universities in this sample develop USR activities and adapt them to get better QA scores. Most of the USR activities are done in the implicit way. They are included in learning and student activities in order to cultivate social responsibility in students' minds and to influence students toward contributions to society. Explicit USR activities are less frequent, possibly because they need additional budgets to communicate to all stakeholders via all kinds of media and university activities, but also partly because the university executives do not seem to fully appreciate the value of communicating extensively about their USR activities.

The universities do have explicit USR activities to some extent. Almost all the M6 students receive the USR activity information from online media and direct private university roadshows at their schools, while parents rarely receive information this way. Parents do get information about private Thai universities from word-of-mouth from relatives and friends, and this is credible because they trust these sources. Students and

parents say that the activities give a favorable impression when they know about them. Some of the university executives recognize this, but at the moment, knowledge among the public of most of the activities seems more limited than the actual extent of what universities do. When students and parents did report about a university's USR activity, it was in favorable terms, and the activity keeps the university in mind as one they should consider, i.e., the university gets into the brand consideration set.

Clearly, educational organizations could apply these USR activities to strengthen their brand images. Thus, USR activities can help gain consideration when potential customers evaluate alternatives, and organizations can link CSR activities to sustainable influence on brand image. We might propose a simple model in Figure 1.

This is hardly new, as it is implied in some other work, but it is useful to explicitly show these linkages to encourage further work. However, we immediately need to add an element. The Thai universities in our interviews seem to be only at a rudimentary stage in explicitly fostering this set of linkages. They are fairly active in implicit USR, and think in terms of how it will help society (and raise QA scores in the process), but are not very active at explicit USR, so that the USR activities do not contribute to brand image as much as they might.

The university has a variety of choices to create general USR activities. Generally, the efficient use of USR should contribute to the university brand image. Some activities do this directly because they can have direct impact on potential students, such as scholarships, tutoring services, etc. When universities do these activities, they make themselves directly relevant to potential students. Universities also need to do general USR activities, although these USR activities have less direct impact on the potential students. The general USR activities show the university capacities and show that universities have responsibility to society. Activities such as projects in rural areas, flood relief work, and student consulting with community organizations and small businesses, do make useful contributions to society However, without much explicit communication about the projects, they do not help much in getting the university into the brand consideration set. It seems clear that we need to add explicit marketing communications into the linkages (Figure 2).

Marketing communications are a moderating variable which strengthens the linkages between USR, brand image, and inclusion in the consideration set. They are necessary to fully realize benefits for the university of engaging in extensive USR activities. One might argue that universities should do good simply for the sake of doing good – but if the university prospers, it is able to continue and expand its good works. These general USR

Figure 1.
Brand image mediates USR impact

Figure 2.
Marketing communications moderates impacts
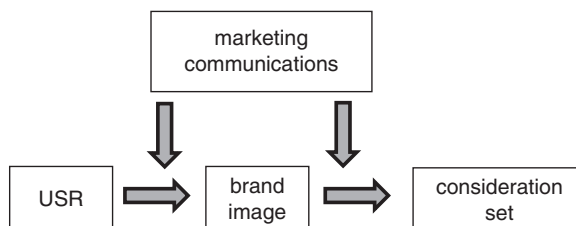
activities should contribute better to university brand image and bring sustainability in some academic areas. For private companies, "be profitable" is the first level of the standard CSR pyramid, i.e., economic viability is the foundation (e.g. Carroll, 1991). Private non-profit universities are not substantially different – they may not seek profits, but they must remain economically viable or their services will be lost.

Conclusion

University executives are often proud to propose the broad USR activities with benefit society. These activities are noticed by government QA assessors, and so indirectly influence brand image, since M6 students (somewhat) and parents (more) pay attention to the QA rankings. However, general USR activities are not very well-known among students or their parents, except in cases where they have heard of some particular activity by word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth is a very credible source for them, but it is not a very widespread channel for making sure most of the potential market is aware.

Thai universities do not seem to be fully utilizing their USR activities to build brand image. The universities need to be more active in communicating many of their activities to the broader stake-holding public, including potential M6 students and their parents. When the activities directly impact the stakeholders, they are quite effective at selecting the right communication strategies to communicate USR activities to match the right stakeholders. However, one important communication channel, the university website, is mainly used when people are actively searching for information. They mostly actively search for information which is directly relevant to them, so they would not normally look up information about the more general USR activities.

The management and leadership of private Thai universities create USR strategies partly to satisfy the QA assessment. However, most go well beyond the bare minimum. Partly, doing more can help gain a higher QA ranking, which universities hope will contribute to a strong brand image. It seems that most of the USR activities do not have a major impact on brand image, because prospective students and their parents are not very aware of them. Because the activities do not directly impact them, they do not actively search for the information much. At any rate, the brand consideration set is formed before there has been much active information search. Even if some students do eventually actively search for more general USR information, it would be too late for brand image to help gain entry to the consideration set.

It seems clear that USR communications strategies need to recognize the difference between active and passive information search. To improve the impact of USR activities on brand image, universities need to get information about the activities to potential customers well before they begin active information search for university choice. If the university is not in the consideration set, there is not likely to be any active search for information about it. Therefore, the strategies of communication about USR are very important to approach to the potential customers in the right time and in the right ways. Clearly, the university should evaluate the worth of the USR activities and communication about USR in order to get high values for both the university and communities.

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