



Perception of Marketing Communication and University Choice Intention of Generation Z in Bangkok

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Abstract

This study examined how Generation Z perceived marketing communication of universities as well as how and why they had the intention to choose a certain university. The study used a qualitative method to obtain a rich understanding of the study topic. The research was conducted using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture the primary data with twenty Thai high school students residing in Bangkok, ages ranging from 15 to 18. The study revealed that Generation Z students were aware of marketing communication implemented by universities. Generation Z students understood that the institutions aimed to create awareness and recruit future students. Once the marketing communication content gained their attention, they usually searched the Internet for more information. They also enjoyed engaging in marketing communication activities such as academic camps that were beneficial for them. In addition, they followed online influencers, who were current university students, to explore student lifestyles on campus. Even though the high school students tended to say that they had made decisions by themselves, they were likely to be influenced by e-word of mouth from their lifestyle reference groups such as online influencers, and peers. High school students decide on their university choices due to university reputation, budget, passion, and lifestyle of nano-influencers. Therefore, this study suggests that universities should provide their high school target audience with both informative and lifestyle content. Universities should team up with their current students, who have established their online presence to strategically create awareness for universities.

Introduction

Thailand's National Strategy (2018 – 2037) aims at sustainable national development and towards that end a goal is "to promote multidimensional human capital development for righteous, skillful, and quality citizens"

(Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2018). Human capital development, especially for the younger generations, is necessary to pursue the National Strategy. Public and private universities are aware of this national plan regarding human capital

development. University students must be equipped with 21st-century skills to serve industries after graduation. Therefore, updated curriculums aligned with social, economic, and technological changes are necessary (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2018).

In addition to social, economic, and technological changes, universities in Thailand also face another challenge: the decline in the birth rate. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2010), Thailand's fertility rate has decreased since 1970, causing lower birth rates. In 2020, less than 600,000 babies were born in Thailand, and the total fertility rate for the country is 1.51 births per woman, which is very low compared to 2.1, that is considered normal by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Saengchote, 2021). Moreover, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, USA, predicts steadily declining fertility rates globally, especially in Asia. Thailand's population is expected to fall from 71 million to 35 million by 2100 (The Lancet, 2020).

Coinciding with Thailand's falling birth rate, the number of Thai students continuing their studies at a university level has decreased. In 2018, 397,855 new students entered universities compared to 366,048 enrolling in universities as freshmen in 2021 according to the statistics reported by the Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2021). Moreover, the key reasons for Thailand's younger generation not to attend a university are the perceptions of a university degree as being unimportant and the lack of monetary support (Food for Thought, 2019). Thus, in order to recruit new students, many Thai universities have been competitively implementing marketing communication campaigns using numerous tools such as advertising, public relations, special events, roadshows, influencers, and sales promotion, including cutting tuition fees and university uniform giveaways (Chiang Mai News, 2020; Ippoodom, 2017).

The United Nations (UN) and Thailand's Ministry of Education define Generation Z as young people born in 2000 or after (considered people born since 2000-2001) (Wood, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2018). The Generation Z population in Thailand amounts to 10,600,000 people, the fourth largest of the total population in Thailand after Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomer, respectively (Thamsettakij, 2017). Although

the UN and the Ministry did not put the last birth year for Generation Z, media such as HuffPost and Forbes has started to refer to children born between 2010 and 2025 as Generation Alpha (Bologna, 2019; Carter, 2016). Consequently, this study defines Generation Z in general as people born from 2000 to 2009.

Wunderman Thompson Intelligence (2020a) studied the motivation and behavior of 4,500 Generation Z consumers aged 13 – 23 years old in the Asia Pacific in 2019. Five hundred of them were Thai. The study revealed that Generation Z did not simply trust someone or something. Only 19% said they trusted celebrities and 16% trusted online influencers (Wunderman Thompson Intelligence, 2020). In another similar study titled "Meet the Zers" by Stamina Asia, the findings revealed that 36% of Generation Z in Thailand think like those in Western culture. Surprisingly, Generation Z in Thailand identified themselves as more individualistic than teenagers in Western culture. Generation Z in Thailand chose a motto that says, "Be Yourself," according to the study (Wunderman Thompson Intelligence, 2020b).

The findings were contrary to other studies relating to how consumers are influenced by marketing communication. For instance, Thorpe (2017) found that 90% of social media users made purchase decisions because of the influence of content on social media. The products and services mentioned in this study included electronic devices, fashion, food and beverage, products, and travel services. Meanwhile in Thailand, BrandAge Online (2018) reported that 82% of Thai consumers were likely to follow opinions or advice from other consumers who have 1,000 – 10,000 followers on their social media. People who follow these consumers or so-called 'nano-influencers' usually are friends, acquaintances, and people who share similar interests (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). More followers have come from word of mouth.

Objectives

From a marketing communication point of view, it is crucial to understand how target audiences perceive marketing communication for both public and private universities to develop strategic marketing communication campaigns, including content, media, and occasions, which resonate with the target audiences. Therefore, the main research objectives of this study were to examine how Generation Z high school students perceive university marketing communication in general

and how they arrive at university choice intention as well as why they made those choices from the point of view of Generation Z in Bangkok, Thailand.

The research questions are as follows:

1) How do Generation Z high school students perceive marketing communication messages for universities through advertising, public relations, sales promotion, personal selling, and special events?

2) How do Generation Z high school students arrive at the university of their choice? And why?

The results of this study will be beneficial in terms of marketing communication implications for universities whose target audiences are Generation Z. Moreover, other brands or organizations that target Generation Z may find the findings of this study useful to their marketing communication practices.

Literature Review

Previous studies that are relevant to this study on Generation Z include media exposure, marketing communication perception, and university preferences.

Media Exposure of Generation Z

Generation Z are active users of online media. Electronic Transactions Development Agency (ETDA) revealed an increase in the average time Generation Z in Thailand spent on the Internet during the Covid-19 pandemic: 12 hours and 5 minutes daily, which was considered the heaviest usage among other generations. Previously, Generation Y spent the longest amount of time on the Internet for six consecutive years. However, ETDA found that Covid-19 could have been why Generation Z spent a half-day on the Internet. They spent over 5 hours studying online and over 4 hours with online entertainment such as TV shows, movies, and music. The rest of the time was spent on online communication. Searching information on the Internet was ranked third for online behaviors regardless of age in 2021 (Electronic Transactions Development Agency, 2021).

Media exposure can be linked to lifestyle. Surutpipit (2018) found that Thai Generation Z are interested in the arts and have lifestyles consistent with media exposure regarding activities, interests, and opinions. Activity, Interest, and Opinion (AIO) have been acknowledged in consumer behavior as a technique to analyze lifestyles because it allows marketers to understand consumers better and categorize them into a psychographic segment (Wind, 1971).

Marketing Communication Perception

Generation Z is exposed to countless content, including entertainment, news, and marketing

communication daily. Marketing communication stimuli appear in different forms, such as online advertisements and user reviews. However, consumers cannot learn everything brands want to communicate through them. People often choose to consume media content that supports their attitude (Camaj, 2019).

Besides, not everything gets interpreted by consumers in the way that brands intend to. Chiarawongwanit (2012) stated that information selectivity is comprised of 1) Selective Exposure, 2) Selective Perception, and 3) Selective Retention. Duggal (2018) noted that the consumer's response is not based on a brand's message but on a consumer's interpretation of the message. This process is called perception. Perception is how people select, organize, and interpret sensory inputs (Solomon, 2007). Duggal (2018) further stated that two types of inputs could contribute to consumer perception and eventually affect decision-making: 1) physical stimuli from the external environment and 2) consumers' expectations and needs based on past experiences.

Marketing Communication materials and activities are considered physical stimuli from external sources. Rašticová & Schüller (2011) studied the marketing communication mix used by universities in the Czech Republic and found that using communication channels that harmonized with prospects' preferences contributed to the success of universities' marketing communication campaigns to some extent. Nutthesri (2017) suggested that higher education institutions pay attention to information selection analysis to set digital marketing communication strategies to convey positive images to their audiences. Thai universities regularly use marketing communication tools to get messages across to their audiences and enhance competitiveness, including email marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), social media marketing, online banners, videos, blogs, and applications. Chancharoen & Chanvichai (2016) also interviewed management and marketing communication teams of international education agencies in Chiang Mai Province, the largest commercial city in the Northern region of Thailand, regarding how they implemented integrated marketing communication strategies and tools. The study found that online marketing, direct marketing, and personal selling enhanced communication between the organizations and their target audience. Suksida & Korcharoen (2022) studied the relationship between the perception of

integrated marketing communication and the decision to study at private universities during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that integrated marketing communication in the forms of news, activities, advertising, public relations, promotions, and event marketing affected the students decision of selecting private universities to pursue their higher education. Public relations, promotion, and event marketing affected the student's decisions at a higher level than advertising.

Parents are another key audience for higher education institutions. In the United States, 29 parents of prospective university students were interviewed for their views on university marketing communication. The study found that they selected a university for their children as if they purchased a consumer product. Financial expenses were the first factor that they took into consideration. Then, they paid attention to institutional culture as one of the most crucial dimensions of a university's reputation. Personal, peer, and internal stakeholder experience could influence their intentions and decision. However, they were skeptical of the university's marketing efforts, such as paid advertisement (Lee, 2019).

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is part of the consumer decision-making process, (Stankevich, 2017) developed a model of consumer decision-making that consists of 5 stages:

1) Need recognition is the first stage when a consumer is aware of his/her needs. Needs can be either a functional need necessary for survival or a psychological need that ties to emotional connection (Oke et al., 2016).

2) Information search happens when a consumer looks for information about a product or a service. A consumer may recall his/her own experience of using a product or service. A consumer can also search from external sources of information such as other consumers, marketing communication materials, and the public (Oke et al., 2016).

3) Evaluations of alternatives happen when a consumer has much information at hand and wants to choose the one that matches his/her need. A consumer usually sets criteria and makes comparisons in terms of quality, size, quantity, and price (Oke et al., 2016).

4) Purchase, which is the stage after a consumer evaluates the alternatives.

5) Outcomes happen after the use of a product or service purchased. A consumer evaluates whether a product or service satisfies his/her need.

Purchase intention happens when a consumer has gone through stages 1-3 from Need recognition, Information search to Evaluations of alternatives of the consumer decision-making process and has selected the choice of purchase in mind. However, a consumer has not made a purchase yet. Sualuang (2019) explained that purchase intention is a favorable opinion or satisfaction expressed to show an intention to buy a product or service. External and internal factors of a consumer drive purchase intention. Furthermore, a consumer believes that the product or service he/she intends to buy can serve his/her problem or need. Therefore, Duggal (2018) suggested that steps 1-3 of the consumer decision-making process are essential to marketing communication because, during these stages, consumers are exposed to external stimuli, which are marketing communication materials. It is an opportunity for brands to convey their messages to consumers. For example, Chuaytukpuan (2014) examined factors that affected 954 students' decision to study at Dhurakij Pundit University. The researcher found three factors 1) Curriculum, 2) Instructors, and 3) Welfare and services, respectively. All three factors are considered external stimuli that affect students' decisions. The content relating to curriculum, instructors, and university services are usually available on its website created by its marketing communication department.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, when consumers are exposed to marketing communication content, they develop perceptions and purchase intention that are parts of the consumer decision-making process. These concepts guided this study to explore how Generation Z perceived university marketing communication and arrived at university choice intention.

Research Methodology

1. Population and Key Informants

The population of the study is Generation Z high school students who would like to further their studies after high school graduation and resided in Bangkok and the adjacent areas. To contact high school students, who were studying online during the COVID-19 pandemic, when this study was conducted, the researcher found it difficult to formally contact teachers through a written

letter to ask permission to interview a student. As a result, a snowball approach was used to recruit most key informants. To ensure that the study covered a broad range of demographics, the researcher initially contacted 6 people, who were 3 high school teachers and 3 parents whose children were in high school. Six key informants derived from purposive sampling consisted of one student from an upper-class family and was studying at a prestige private school and five students who were raised in a middle-class family and were studying at public high schools.

After each interview, the researcher asked the students to recommend a friend who studied at a different school. Friends who were introduced to the researcher were study buddies at a tutoring school, old friends from an elementary school, or friends whom they met through an online community. The number of key informants recruited by the snowball technique was 14 students.

Therefore, the total number of key informants was 20 Generation Z high school students with the intention to enter university after high school graduation. They were aged between 15-18 years old and residing in Bangkok and the adjacent areas. There were 11 females, 9 males, and 1 student identified as LGBTQ. Eleven students were on a science track and five were studying in a Math-English track, while 4 students focused on foreign languages such as Chinese and Japanese.

The key informants were from different schools located in Bangkok and the adjacent areas and categorized into three types (see Table 1) to ensure a diversity of the key informants in terms of lifestyle, interest, and family's social and economic status. In Thailand, tuition at private and demonstration schools is usually higher than tuition at public schools. Consequently, it is assumed that private and demonstration schools are for students from upper-middle-class and upper-class backgrounds. Students' backgrounds attending public schools vary considerably as public schools are for everyone, particularly those in middle-class, lower-middle, and lower classes.

Table 1: Types of High Schools where the key informants attended

| Type of High School | The Number of Key Informants |
|---|------------------------------|
| Public schools governed by the Education Ministry or Bangkok Metropolitan. | 12 |
| Private schools governed by the Office of the Private Education Commission | 6 |
| Demonstration schools governed by the Office of the Higher Education Commission | 2 |
| Total | 20 |

2. Research Instrument

The research objectives were to gain insight into how Generation Z perceives marketing communication for universities as well as how and why they arrive at their university choice. Based on the literature review, several previous studies that examined the attitude and behavior of Generation Z were usually conducted using a quantitative approach, but this study used a qualitative approach to gain insightful opinions of Generation Z. Thus, a set of semi-interview questions was constructed based on the literature review to collect primary data from the key informants. The semi-interview questions were reviewed by 3 experts consisting of a marketing communication lecturer who was also in charge of recruiting new university students, a business lecturer, and an entrepreneur who was a guest lecturer for a media business management class at the university level. Then, the interview questions were revised according to the experts' comments.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

An interview process started with the researcher making initial contact with a student to explain the research objective and interview procedure to potential key informants, and a consent form was sent through a Line application. If a student was interested in taking part in this study, the researcher asked the student to ask permission from his/her parent. Once the student got permission from his/her parent and returned the consent form, the interview was scheduled. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the one-on-one interviews were conducted through online communication applications or phone calls from June to December 2021. The interview sessions typically lasted for 45-60 minutes. The researcher reached data saturation at the 20th interview, where the research noticed redundancy in how key informants perceived university marketing communication and arrived at their choice intention. Each interview was recorded with permission from the key informants. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes, behavioral patterns, and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this case, the research reviewed the interview transcripts of 20 key informants to identify themes to answer the research questions.

4. Research Ethics Approval

The study received an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and followed IRB protocols to obtain consent from the students and their parents before the interview.

Results

Findings from the thematic analysis of the interviews suggested how Generation Z high school students perceive marketing communication messages for universities through advertising, public relations, sales promotion, personal selling, and special events as follows.

Bachelor's degree is still important for Gen Z

Student enrollment at universities have decreased over the years from 2018 - 2021 (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2021), and Thai society has questioned whether a university degree is necessary for this disruptive era (Sapsanguanboon, 2020). Still, all key informants voiced their opinions about how essential it was to study at a university level. They thought that society still valued a Bachelor's Degree. The degree is the key to desired highly paid careers. Most key informants have started thinking about choosing majors since they entered high school. A few even started thinking about their future university majors and careers as early as middle school.

Only one key informant, who was currently working part-time and planned to take a gap year after high school graduation in order to gain enough money for university tuition fees, was still undecided on his study major, but he said he would go to a university.

"A bachelor's degree is still a must-have. It is the safest way to guarantee that you can earn decent money after graduation." (Key Informant no.19)

Most key informants knew what they wanted to study at a university level based on their talents or interests. Thus, they said they wanted to earn a bachelor's degree to learn more about their interest and prepare themselves for future stable careers. A couple of key informants were inspired by current national challenges and wanted to study particular majors to solve the country's problems.

"I am interested in political science. I am interested in politics. Thailand's current political situation got me interested. I want to study [political science]. I want to learn how to steer the country while the economy is down and many people are unemployed." (Key Informant no.2)

However, a few students aimed to study in foreign countries with a better education system, more hands-on experience, and foreign language advantages.

Gen Z is well aware of university marketing communications

Universities have utilized several marketing

communication tools such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and special events to reach their target audiences (Suksida & Korcharoen, 2022). The key informants were aware of marketing communication implemented not only by universities but also by other educational organizations such as cram schools and educational consultant agencies. The key informants understood that such marketing communication activities aimed to create awareness and recruit future students. They were not against the practice. A few key informants even agreed that it was good that universities engage in marketing communication because students could explore more various educational options before making critical decisions.

"I understand that universities run marketing communication campaigns to get their names across, but they should come up with brilliant content, organize trendy events to meet students' needs. Personally, if content can catch my attention, I'll look for more information on the Internet." (Key Informant no.6)

Advertising

In terms of being exposed to marketing communication materials of universities, the key informants hardly saw advertisements of any universities through social media. Only a few key informants said they recalled an advertisement for a specific private university.

Public Relations

This study defines providing useful information through communication channels without having to pay for space or airtime as part of public relations. Therefore, a university's Facebook page, a university website, or a faculty website are considered tools for public relations. Instead of waiting for marketing communication messages such as online advertising to reach them, the key informants said they initiated the information search most of the time or visited universities' websites directly.

Universities' official websites

As key informants have already had academic majors in mind, they "Googled" by using their majors of interest as a keyword. They did not mind whether public or private universities offered their favorite majors. Then, they usually visited universities' official websites, official Facebook pages, and official Instagram accounts if any. Almost all of them claimed that they followed official Facebook pages and official Instagram accounts that they visited to ensure that they get notifications when there were any updates. When they found interesting

information, such as academic camps and scholarship opportunities, they often shared with particular friends who shared mutual interests.

While searching for information, they looked for curriculums, requirements, tuition fees, scholarships, and an application process. They also wanted to explore what it would be like to study at a particular university and the lifestyles of university students. Yet, they said they could not get this information from universities' official websites. Consequently, a few informants decided to talk directly with university students who had graduated from the same high school. Many informants turned to Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok to explore campus life, lifestyles, and extracurricular activities from their online influencers.

"I searched for a communication arts major on the Internet. I also explored it on YouTube. There is a girl named Koy. She and her three friends are studying at the Faculty of Communication Arts at W University. This clip was suggested to me automatically. Once I watched it, I keep watching her content about her study and lifestyle. I also went to the university's website to learn more about the major too." (Key Informant no.7)

Facebook

The key informants use many social media and online applications daily. Each platform appeared to be used for specific purposes (see Table 2). However, there is a mismatch between the main platform used by Generation Z and that used by universities. Generation Z high school students used Instagram every day for several purposes such as to express their interests, build their online presence, interact with friends, search for information, and entertain themselves. Meanwhile, these high school students said many universities in Thailand usually provided information on their Facebook pages. This was the reason why high school students said that Facebook was the platform that Generation Z used once in a while to mainly check on information updated by universities. Although Generation Z was on Instagram most of the time, the key informants did not mind logging into Facebook now and then to monitor universities' updates. Their perception was that universities' Facebook pages were almost as informative as their official website. Some key informants said they followed universities of their interests on Facebook.

On the contrary, they often came across marketing communication content by tutoring schools or academies on Instagram. They also said they liked to watch video content on Instagram Stories, YouTube, and TikTok

created by current university students showing their lifestyle and daily routines, including getting ready, studying in class, and hanging out with friends after class. Even though this type of lifestyle user-generated content was not created for marketing communication purposes, the content was indirectly speaking to audiences for universities associated with those videos.

Table 2 Purposes of Social Media and Applications Usage for Generation Z

| Purposes | Social Media and Applications |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Express their interests, opinions | Instagram, Twitter |
| Interactions with friends | Instagram, Messenger, Discord |
| Interactions with teachers | Line |
| Education | Facebook, YouTube |
| Information search | Google, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube |
| Leisure | Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Streaming services |
| News | Twitter, Facebook |

Sales Promotion

In the case of educational institutions, sales promotion usually appears in the forms of scholarships and giving away learning devices such as a tablet (Suksida and Korcharoen, 2022). Key informants mentioned that they usually stopped scrolling when they saw a post regarding scholarship opportunities. Some key informants even shared scholarship or discount information with their peers as they thought the information would be beneficial to their friends as well.

"Actually, I'm going to join an accounting camp next week. It is an online activity hosted by the Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy, W University. I knew about this event because my classmate shared it with me. Moreover, I also shared this event with my other close friends because it has a discount promotion for the camp ticket. One of them is interested, and she will attend the camp with me. We plan to attend a [W University] marketing camp next year. And, I have already followed the School's IG just in case." (Key Informant no.5)

The key informants did not mention giving away devices for educational purposes. It seemed that this kind of promotion was an insignificant factor for them when considering their university choices.

Special Events

Interestingly, some of the key informants could recall engaging in roadshow activities where university representatives spoke to them in the classroom or virtually during COVID-19. One of the key informants, who was interested in a music major, recalled his experience from attending the virtual roadshow activity as follows:

"A staff from one particular university came to my class to give helpful advice on how to choose a university. He was so nice. His fun talk got me excited. I went to the university's website and found out that this university does not have a music major. Anyway, it was nice of him to tell us what we will study at the university. But, it would have been better if he could have talked about campus life, like where I can hang out with my friends. He should have mentioned that too." (Key Informant no.6)

Several key informants mentioned they enjoyed participating in academic camps hosted by universities. They said they had learned a lot about majors and what they would get to learn at a university level. It was also an opportunity to meet other students who share academic or future career preferences. Most importantly, they have established connections with university students who served as staff at the camps. After the event, they have kept in touch by following personal Instagram and chatting. These university students have become their academic mentors. One of the key informants who wants to become a dentist shared her experience as follows:

"I have attended a science camp since I was in grade 8. ... Now, when I have questions about school or need someone to talk to about my university decision, I talked to an older friend whom I met at a pre-med camp. She is a university student majoring in pharmacy, but she usually gives me helpful advice to prepare myself for entering a school of dentistry." (Key Informant no.12)

Thus, both in-person and virtual special events can create experiences that resonate with the target audience and lead to the likelihood of them remembering and recalling associated universities.

For the second research question, how do Generation Z high school students arrive at the university of their choice? And why? Findings from the thematic analysis of the interviews revealed as follows:

Evaluations of alternatives to arrive at university choice intention

To answer the question, the key informants said they made comparisons of curriculums, requirements, and tuition fees when choosing their top universities in mind. The key informants also evaluated their choices based on student lifestyle -- what would their life be like if they studied there? Lifestyle can be equivalent to the quality of life on campus, not just curriculums or programs. The key informants said universities did not have any marketing communication content to answer this question. Lucky for them, campus experiences are

made available all over the Internet by their reference groups, such as university students who are online influencers and some university students who went to the same high school.

"[Video clips created by universities or faculties] are boring. It's too informative and official. I don't like when it looks official. Like Frung, she is a medical student. I like watching her vlogs [as I want to become a doctor]. But, I'm juxtaposing a medical major to a social science major because I also watch Peanut Butter Channel. I've just seen her video, and she said she'd actually studied a science track in high school, but she realized science was not her thing. ... Eventually, this YouTuber switched her track of study [to a social science major]." (Key Informant no.8)

"I always wanted to study at W University, but lately, I've been following an IG of a girl who graduated from my high school, and now she is a freshman at X University. Her activities at the university fascinate me. I would love to have a similar experience. If you ask me today, I kind of go towards X University." (Key Informant no.14)

They claimed that it was not that important in terms of academic reputation. Still, some key informants started their university search based on university academic rankings. Besides, all of the key informants' university choices included reputational top-ranked and mid-tier public universities. This behavioral pattern is aligned with the research results that examined factors influencing high school students to study at public universities. Kasemsarn (2013) found that academic reputation, lecturer's quality, influence from parents, school counseling, job prospects, and personal impression affected students' decision to study at public universities. However, some stayed true to their words. For instance, they focused on what they wanted to study and the environment, not reputation.

"I'm deciding between W university and Y university. I prefer to study in the Y campus environment. I know because I follow a medical student at Y university on TikTok. His content is useful and entertaining at the same time." (Key Informant no.20)

These lifestyle content created by university students often reach the key informants organically because of their mutual interests. Fortunately, universities also earn their popularity because of the work of their current students, who naturally become "brand ambassadors" in the eyes of high school students and powerful influencers from a marketing communication perspective.

The study also aimed to understand why Generation Z high school students in Bangkok, Thailand have an intention to choose certain universities. The study involved twenty (20) key informant interviews, and a thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts. The findings revealed four key reasons that influence their university choice intention:

1. Reputation: When naming the university choices from the top of their minds, all key informants started out with top-ranked or mid-tier public universities. High school students from prestigious schools, in particular, tended to believe that public universities are more reputable than private universities. Some of the informants did not even explore private universities as their options. This belief persists even though public and private universities offer similar programs with similar tuition fees.

2. Budget Constraint: Some students aim to enter public universities because they believe they are more affordable. However, they also consider scholarships offered by private universities. They believe that private universities with higher tuition fees provide better facilities and student support. Some students prefer universities located in Bangkok or close to their houses to avoid extra living expenses.

3. Major Selection: Students with a strong passion for a particular major tend to explore a range of universities. Although public universities are top of mind, they believe that public and private universities have similar academic standards. University reputation does not matter to them as long as they get to study what they love.

"I saw a vlog of a private university student majoring in the Korean Language. She was doing a presentation in Korean, and the classroom atmosphere was lively. I was impressed. I've googled and realized that only a few universities in Thailand offer Korean as a major. I don't want to compete with others for a spot in a public university. So, even though it is a private university, it is ranked top on my list so far." (Key Informant no.1)

4. Lifestyle Influencers: In addition, the study reveals that the lifestyle of nano-influencers, who have 1,000 – 10,000 followers on their social media accounts (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), have a meaningful impact on students' university choice intention. They follow current university students on social media to check out university student lifestyles, unintentionally learning more about specific universities through video content.

Some students (Key Informant no.14 and 20) were persuaded by the university lifestyle content they watched such as "Day in the life of a medical student", "Study with me at a university", and "Getting ready to go to class with me". Even though universities did not generate this lifestyle content themselves, the content was interesting and sincere to grab the key informants' attention and gain their hearts for the universities referred to in the videos.

Discussion

Based on the study results, the behavior patterns of Generation Z high school students arriving at their selection of an university are aligned with the first three stages of the five-stage consumer decision-making process developed by Engel et al. (1968, as cited in Stankevich, 2017). They consist of need recognition, information search, and evaluations of alternatives.

The first stage of the model is that they recognize the need to be educated and earn a bachelor's degree. Even though the idea of taking a gap year before going to a university was mentioned, it is not a common practice for most high school students. Growing up in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, they have learned that if they would like to become successful in their careers, they must be academically competitive. They believe that finishing a bachelor's degree would open doors for career opportunities.

Next, it seems natural for Generation Z high school students, who practically grew up with technology, to seek information that they are interested in, which is the second stage of the process. They actively seek information provided by universities available on websites and popular social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Content available online through universities' owned media is considered part of the public relations practice. When it comes to advertisements by universities, the study revealed that Generation Z high school students hardly recall seeing any of them. The findings are similar to what Suksida & Korcharoen (2022) found about the marketing communication factors influencing students when deciding on a university. Advertising had less impact on students' university decisions among marketing communication tools, including public relations, promotion, and event marketing.

However, they unintentionally learn about universities, particularly student lifestyles, through social media platforms that they are daily exposed to such as

Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This word-of-mouth content generated by current university students serves as a review from real consumers. These current university students who have an online presence can be considered nano or micro-influencers who seem to have an impact on the student choice intention. Furthermore, some Generation Z high school students would rather seek information through hands-on experience. They explore their interests by participating in academic activities hosted by universities. Based on the students' perceptions, universities should engage their target audiences with online content and special activities since they help students recognize and recall the universities and the majors the university has to offer. According to Khurram et al. (2018), brand recall and brand recognition are as significant as an act of purchase.

Then, university information gathered during the previous stage is compared. This behavior pattern of Generation Z high school students corresponds to the stage of evaluations of alternatives, the third stage in the model of consumer decision-making. Stankevich (2017) proposed that evaluations happen when a consumer has more than one choice and has to choose only one. Oke et al. (2016) suggested that consumers usually set criteria and compare alternatives in terms of quality, size, quantity, and price. In the same way, students are likely to compare curriculums and tuition fees. Interestingly, the results revealed an insight that has been overlooked by many universities. Generation Z high school students also compare student lifestyles among universities of their interests based on generated content of the nano or micro-influencers whom they follow. The finding in the context of education is contrary to what the earlier study had found that not many of Generation Z trusted online influencers (Wunderman Thompson Intelligence, 2020a).

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

A thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts of 20 key informant interviews. The findings revealed three essential elements (as shown in Figure 1), involved in the perception of marketing communication and university choice intention from the point of view of Generation Z in Bangkok, Thailand, which can help place a university at the top of the mind of high school students (Area A in Figure 1). Information is what Generation Z high school students are looking for during the process of setting choice intentions and decision-making about

their future university. Marketing communication practitioners should provide them with the information needed, both informative content and lifestyle content.

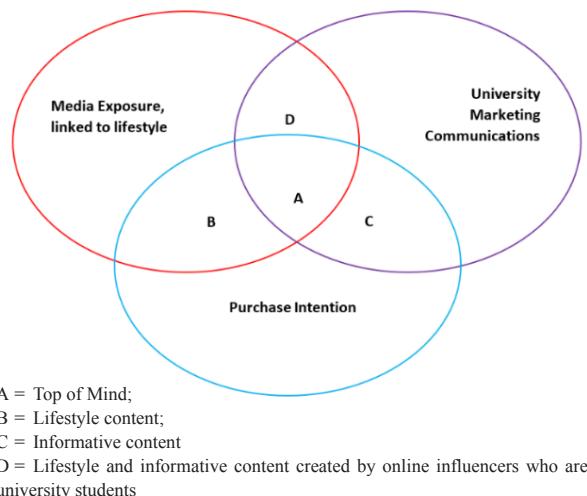


Figure 1: Keys elements of perception of marketing communication and university choice intention (purchase intention),

Informative content

1) Enhancing SEO. Based on the insights gained from the Generation Z key informants, they are confident to declare what they want to study. They aim to enter university to establish a foundation for their career and learn more about their interests. However, the question is where they want to study. They still need information to arrive at a decision. When they are in doubt, they search online for answers. As information is needed, universities should provide Generation Z high school students with the right information whenever they need it. Furthermore, universities should position their websites at the top of search engine results by improving their search engine optimization (SEO) (Area C in Figure 1). That means they should actively update content that high school students look for on their official websites. Content provided by universities is informative and trustworthy in the opinions of key informants.

2) Enhancing university experience through academic camps and competitions. These activities usually enable high school students to gain hands-on learning experience, interact with faculties as well as current students in person, and obtain a glimpse of life on a university campus firsthand (Area C in Figure 1). It can be said that universities have followed principles of experiential marketing, which could draw consumer

engagement and make the experience memorable (Rizvi, 2019). Wood & Masterman (2007) stated that a consumer response to the experience of attending an event can be measured by feelings, attitudes, intentions, and behavior. Universities should organize these special events for high school students to attend and encourage them to establish and maintain relationships with current university students who may be staff at the event. This kind of bond can lead to preference, liking, word of mouth, and university choice intention.

Lifestyle content

3) Supporting current students who are nano-influencers. Nano-influencers are people who have built their social media presence with 1,000 – 10,000 followers. Most of them are friends or people who share common interests. They can grab the attention of an audience with organic behavior, so the perceived credibility is higher compared to highly paid celebrity influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Generation Z high school students mentioned that they have come across and watched video content created by current university students and also ended up following some of them because they were curious about student lifestyle on campus. Universities should host more lifestyle special events on campus for these nano-influencer students to participate and create more lifestyle content relating to university life (Area B in Figure 1).

Lifestyle & Informative content

4) Using media platforms that Gen Z uses daily. Furthermore, universities should pay attention to media selection. To reach high school students, a university Facebook page should not be the only social media platform as the target audience is not regularly active on Facebook. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are important in students' lifestyles and should be used to convey university messages as well since the study revealed that Instagram and TikTok are platforms that Generation Z uses every day. Universities should also use them to reach their target audience. High school students claim that they need information about the curriculums and scholarships, universities should create informative content that is easy to understand to fit the nature of these online platforms, which focus on lifestyles. Therefore, the content should be informative and entertaining to harmonize with the selected lifestyle media and meet the target audience's preference (Area D in Figure 1). Universities should strategically collaborate with their influential resources, their current students, who may be nano-influencers, as e-word of

mouth plays a significant role in high school students' decision-making process. Lifestyle content is important, but at the same time providing information on what the details of the major is, when scholarships are available, and what are the major requirements, created by real university students can naturally create awareness and a favorable attitude among high school students toward universities involved. What's more, this content was created and posted organically by current university students. The content appears to be earned media, which is beneficial to universities. The content gets exposed to wider audiences and boosts credibility for the universities mentioned in the eyes of the public.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study only touched upon some external factors, including the perceived value of higher education as well as social and economic status based on the types of high school key informants attended, which can affect the perception and university choice intention. Future quantitative studies should be conducted to consider these factors and other factors such as family background and culture as well as exploring the perception and choice intention of a larger population of Generation Z in Thailand.

In summary, this study trailed the process of university choice intention of 20 Generation Z, who were high school students, to understand their perception and intention when choosing a university that may define their future. The study revealed that both informative and lifestyle marketing communications messages play important roles in shaping Generation Z's perceptions toward universities. Particularly, lifestyle marketing communication messages that were ignored by many universities, play an important role when students are involved in the process of making a choice intention. Fortunately, some university students unintendedly act as ambassadors or influencers for their universities by generating the lifestyle content that many Generation Z high school students are looking for. Generation Z is likely to be influenced by these reference groups, such as online influencers and older peers, even though they claim to choose a university based on their own decisions. Understanding Generation Z's perception of marketing communication and choice intention can be helpful for recruitment teams and other relevant businesses to effectively communicate with Generation Z.

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