

University Brand Development Model and Communication Strategy to Create a Competitive Advantage of Silpakorn University, Thailand

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Abstract

In the increasingly competitive Thai higher education sector, Silpakorn University faces a strategic challenge in reconciling its historical identity as a historical art school with its modern reality as a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary institution. This research aimed to address this disconnect by developing and empirically validating a brand development and communication model to guide the university in creating a strong, cohesive brand identity, ultimately fostering brand advocacy.

A mixed-method research design was employed. The qualitative stream involved semi-structured interviews with seven key university staff responsible for branding and communication to explore internal strategic perspectives. Concurrently, the quantitative stream surveyed 684 undergraduate students to test a proposed model grounded in Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative insights, while Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were used for quantitative measurement validation and hypothesis testing.

The findings successfully validated the S-O-R model, demonstrating an excellent fit with the empirical data ($\chi^2/df = 0.80$, CFI = 1.00, GFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.000). The study reveals that Brand Image is the single most powerful predictor of student brand advocacy (total influence = 0.67), proving significantly more impactful than brand awareness (total influence = 0.33). Notably, the direct path from brand awareness to brand advocacy was found to be statistically insignificant. Branding stimuli—marketing communication, customization, trendiness, and interaction—were found to exert their influence indirectly by shaping these crucial student perceptions (the organism). Among these stimuli, interaction and trendiness emerged as the most influential drivers in building a positive brand image.

The study concludes that for an established institution like Silpakorn University, fostering brand advocacy is not a result of simple awareness but is the outcome of meticulously cultivating a strong, positive brand image. The path to strengthening its competitive position lies in a holistic, student-centric approach that strategically manages student interactions and institutional relevance. By harmonizing its artistic legacy with its comprehensive identity through these key drivers, the university can effectively transform its students into lifelong brand advocates.

Keywords: University Branding, Higher Education, Brand Image, Brand Advocacy

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Introduction

The landscape of higher education has transformed. Universities are no longer just centers of learning but complex organizations competing in a crowded global marketplace for students, funding, and prestige (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In this environment, a university's brand—its composite promise of value, history, and culture—has become a critical strategic asset (Chapleo, 2011). As argued by Keller (2013), strong brand equity is essential for creating loyalty and differentiation. Yamin (2024) pointed that a strong branding strategy enhances institutional reputation, increase enrollment rates, and improve student satisfaction. The study highlights the importance of aligning branding efforts with student expectations to ensure sustainability. Policymakers and university administrators should prioritize strategic branding as a long-term investment for academic success. This imperative is particularly acute in Thailand, where over 150 public and private institutions vie for a shrinking pool of domestic students while also aiming to attract an international audience (Rungfamai & Tang, 2018).

Silpakorn University, founded in 1943 by the artist Silpa Bhirasri, represents a unique case within this context. Its powerful legacy as Thailand's premier institution for arts and design has endowed it with a distinct brand identity. However, as the university has expanded into a comprehensive institution with faculties in science, technology, and management, it faces a critical brand architecture problem: a disconnect between its historical public perception as an "art school" and its contemporary reality. This disconnect can lead to confused messaging and missed opportunities to attract students to its diverse non-arts programs.

To understand how branding efforts translate into student advocacy, this study adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework as its guiding theoretical lens. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model is a versatile framework used to explain how environmental factors influence behavior across diverse contexts. For example, it has been applied to understand how internet usage (stimulus) impacts the well-being and life satisfaction (response) of the elderly. In the realm of e-commerce, the model is particularly effective for studying consumer behavior. Chan, Cheung, and Lee (2017) emphasize that online environmental stimuli are primary triggers for impulse buying, a phenomenon that also explored using the S-O-R framework. Given its proven applicability, the present research utilizes the S-O-R model to examine the drivers of impulse buying behavior. This framework posits that an individual's behavioral response is not a direct reaction to an external stimulus but is mediated by their internal cognitive and affective state (the organism).

The central problem this research addresses is the need for Silpakorn University to evolve its brand strategy to reflect its modern, multi-disciplinary character without abandoning its foundational artistic soul. While the importance of university branding is growing, the field remains under-researched, particularly within a non-Western, Thai context (Melewar & Nguyen, 2015). Despite the growing importance of branding in higher education, several research gaps remain, particularly within the Thai context. First, there is a scarcity of empirical studies that apply a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to investigate the brand development of a specific

Thai university, integrating both internal strategic perspectives and external student perceptions. Second, while many studies focus on brand image or student satisfaction, the drivers of brand advocacy—the ultimate level of brand loyalty—remain underexplored in the higher education sector. Third, existing literature has not sufficiently addressed the unique branding challenge faced by established universities like Silpakorn, which must harmonize a strong historical identity with a modern, multi-disciplinary reality. This study aims to fill these gaps by developing and validating a brand development model based on the S-O-R framework, providing a nuanced understanding of how branding activities translate into student advocacy within this specific context. This research offers significant contributions to both theory and practice in the field of higher education branding. Theoretical contributions: First, this study empirically validates the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model within higher education context, confirming its utility for explaining the antecedents of student advocacy. Second, it refines branding theory by providing evidence that for an established institution, brand image acts as a far more critical mediator in driving advocacy than brand awareness, challenging a simplistic marketing funnel perspective. Finally, it contributes a validated, context-specific model that can serve as a foundation for future research on university branding in emerging economies. Practical and managerial contributions: For Silpakorn University, this study provides a data-driven, strategic roadmap for brand management, offering clear guidance on which branding activities—particularly those related to student interaction and institutional trendiness—are most effective for building a positive brand image. The findings empower university leadership to allocate resources more effectively, shifting focus from general awareness campaigns to initiatives that enhance the student experience and shape perception. Furthermore, the model and insights are applicable to other Thai universities facing similar challenges of balancing heritage with modernization.

Objective

This study aims to fill this gap by developing and empirically validating a brand development and communication model tailored to Silpakorn University. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. Its primary purpose is to develop and empirically validate a brand development model that explains the relationships between the university's branding activities (Stimulus), students' internal perceptions of brand image and awareness (Organism), and their subsequent willingness to become brand advocates (Response). By identifying the key variables and their proposed relationships, this research seeks to provide actionable recommendations to strengthen Silpakorn University's competitive position and ensure its continued legacy.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A brand is more than a logo; it is a complex set of mental associations held by stakeholders that adds perceived value to an offering (Keller, 2013). The process of branding is the strategic effort to create, manage, and strengthen these associations (Aaker, 2009). In higher education,

branding has evolved from a simple marketing function into a core strategic imperative. An effective university brand must articulate a clear, compelling, and authentic identity that differentiates the institution and fosters loyalty among its diverse stakeholders, including students, faculty, alumni, and employers (Chapleo, 2010). This process is fundamentally about managing the institution's most critical asset: its reputation. As a result of the employment of social media, interpersonal contact and user involvement are made possible, which results in the modification of traditional hierarchical communication techniques and the introduction of an unexpected component into the decision-making process of customers. Even though it is considered to be a component of internet marketing, social media marketing is a crucial component for individuals and businesses that need to retain their competitiveness. On the other hand, the success of social media marketing is dependent on the presence of innovative items, the responsiveness of organizations to the market, and the construction of powerful online platforms (Barus, 2024).

In essence, the S-O-R model elucidates the mediating psychological processes between a university's branding efforts and the tangible outcomes. The first component of the framework is the Stimulus (S), which represents the university's branding efforts. These are the external branding and marketing activities the university undertakes to influence stakeholders. Based on a review of branding literature, this study identifies four key stimuli. First is Marketing Communication, the collection of strategic efforts—including digital media, public relations, and events—used to inform, persuade, and remind consumers about the university (Clow & Baack, 2018). Second is Customization, the concept of “customization” has evolved into a more sophisticated and data-driven paradigm: personalization. While customization traditionally involved students selecting from a predefined menu of majors and electives, personalization empowers them to co-design and navigate unique learning pathways that adapt to their skills, pace, and career aspirations. This shift positions the university not just as student-centric, but as a dynamic partner in an individual's lifelong learning journey (World Economic Forum, 2023). This is followed by Trendiness, the brand's perceived modernity, relevance, and alignment with contemporary values, which is critical for connecting with younger generations (Beverland, 2009). Finally, Interaction encompasses the sum of all touchpoints a student has with the university, where value is co-created and the brand promise is validated or undermined (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

The second component, the Organism (O), signifies student perceptions and internal states. This represents the internal cognitive and affective processing that occurs when a student is exposed to the stimuli. The key organismic variables are Brand Awareness and Brand Image. Brand Awareness is the extent to which students can recall and recognize the university and serves as the foundational first step in building a brand relationship (Aaker, 2009). Brand Image, in contrast, is the rich tapestry of perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and associations that a student holds about the university. It is not what the university claims to be (brand identity), but what it is perceived to be (Keller, 2013).

The final component is the Response (R), which covers the behavioral outcomes resulting

from the interplay of stimuli and organism. The ultimate desired response is Brand Advocacy, the highest level of brand loyalty, where students move beyond mere satisfaction to actively and voluntarily promote the university to others through positive word-of-mouth (Reichheld & Markey, 2011). This framework leads to a series of hypotheses suggesting that the Stimuli will positively influence the Organism states: Brand Awareness and Brand Image, which in turn will positively influence the Response: Brand Advocacy.

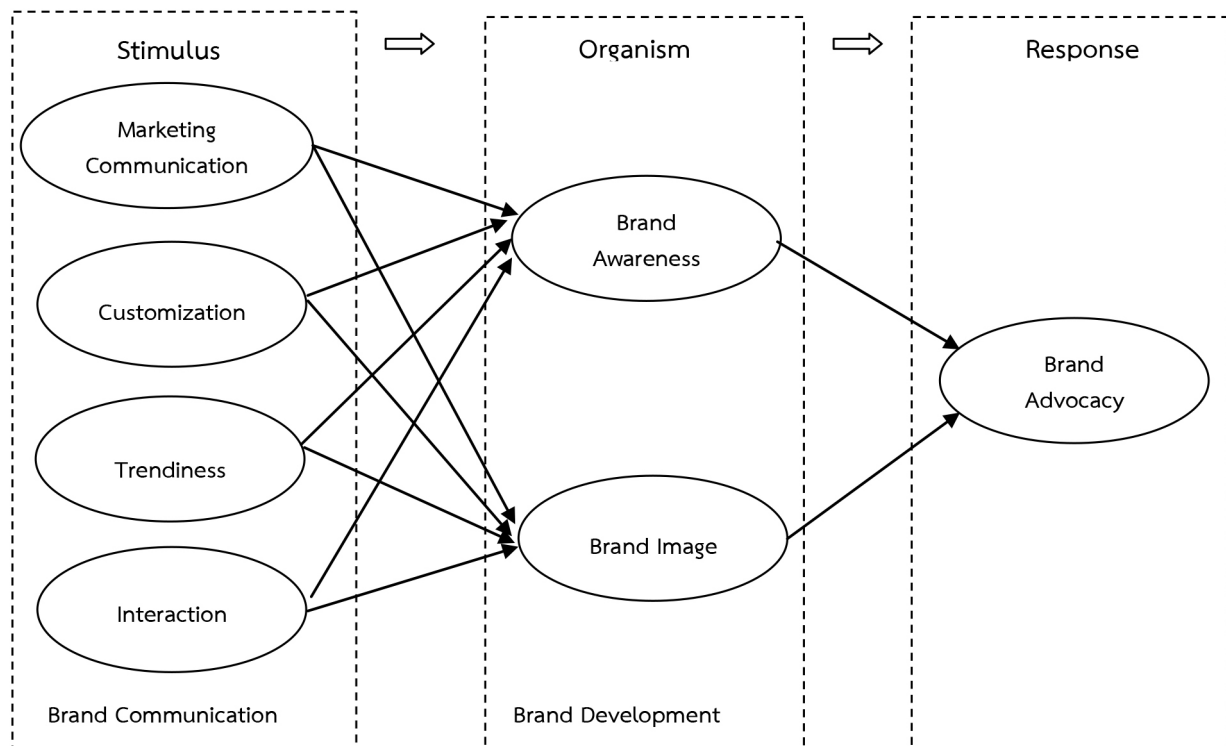


Figure 1 Research conceptual model

Methodology

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of Silpakorn's branding dynamics, this study employed a mixed-method research design (Creswell, 2014). This approach involves the concurrent collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, which are then integrated during the interpretation phase to provide a more robust and nuanced conclusion. The qualitative phase was not merely exploratory but also played a crucial role in the development of the quantitative instrument. Insights gathered from the semi-structured interviews with university staff helped refine and validate the constructs in the initial conceptual framework. Specifically, the interviews confirmed the relevance of the chosen stimuli (marketing communication, customization, trendiness, interaction) and provided context-specific language that was used to improve the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire items for the student survey, thereby enhancing the instrument's content validity.

The quantitative phase was designed to statistically test the relationships proposed in the S-O-R framework. The population consisted of all 26,415 undergraduate students at Silpakorn University, from

which a total of 684 valid responses were obtained via convenience sampling, significantly exceeding the minimum required sample size. The primary instrument was a structured online questionnaire with items adapted from established literature and measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Content validity was established through an Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) assessment with a panel of three experts, while reliability was confirmed through a pilot test, with all constructs demonstrating excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.70). The data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the LISREL program, involving both Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model and path analysis to test the structural relationships. This approach was chosen for its ability to simultaneously analyze complex path relationships among multiple latent constructs and account for measurement error, providing a more rigorous test of the theory than traditional regression methods. The Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation method was used as the data met the assumptions of multivariate normality. The model's fit with the empirical data was evaluated using a range of standard statistical fit indices and their recommended thresholds. Furthermore, following the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), the measurement model's validity and reliability were further assessed using standard criteria. Convergent validity was evaluated by examining Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with a threshold of > 0.50. Discriminant validity was assessed to ensure that constructs were distinct from one another. Composite Reliability (CR) was calculated for each construct, with a threshold of > 0.70 indicating strong internal consistency.

A convenience sampling method was employed. This non-probability technique was justified due to the large and geographically dispersed nature of the student population across multiple campuses, making probability sampling methods impractical within the study's timeframe and resource constraints. Inclusion criteria for the sample were: (1) being a currently enrolled undergraduate student at Silpakorn University during the data collection period, and (2) providing consent to participate. Exclusion criteria included: (1) graduate students, and (2) respondents who failed to complete the majority of the questionnaire. While convenience sampling limits generalizability, the large sample size of 684 students provides a robust dataset for testing the proposed theoretical model within the studied population.

Addressing Common Method Bias (CMB) Since the data for both independent and dependent variables were collected from the same source at a single point in time, procedures were implemented to minimize the potential for Common Method Bias. Procedural remedies included ensuring respondent anonymity and confidentiality to encourage honest answers, and arranging the questionnaire items so that questions related to dependent variables were placed after those related to independent variables.

Results

The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings provides a holistic and data-driven picture of Silpakorn University's brand development. From the qualitative view within the university, thematic analysis of the interviews revealed a strategic and evolving approach to brand communication. Key themes included the successful shift to a hybrid and unified communication model, which features a central division setting the overarching strategy while empowering individual faculties to execute tailored communication. The university also consciously employs an integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategy across its primary channels—the official website, Facebook, and Instagram—to create a cohesive brand message. Finally, informants identified four primary ongoing core branding challenges: maintaining consistency, achieving distinction, managing perception to avoid appearing overly commercial, and ensuring adaptation to the values of younger generations.

From the quantitative student perspective, the SEM analysis produced a model with an excellent fit to the empirical data ($\chi^2/df = 0.80$, CFI = 1.00, GFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.000), confirming the validity of the proposed framework. The path analysis revealed several key findings. First was the dominance of Brand Image, as the direct path from Brand Image to Brand Advocacy was the single most powerful and significant finding (path coefficient = .835). In contrast, the surprising weakness of Brand Awareness was evident, as its path to Brand Advocacy was statistically insignificant. The study also confirmed the indirect influence of branding stimuli, which shape student perceptions rather than directly creating advocates. The total influence of each stimulus was calculated as Interaction (0.30), Trendiness (0.28), Customization (0.25), and Marketing Communication (0.16).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs before hypothesis testing, a two-stage Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted. First-Order CFA: The initial measurement model was tested to validate the seven latent constructs: Marketing Communication (MC), Customization (CT), Trendiness (TD), Interaction (IA), Brand Awareness (BAw), Brand Image (BI), and Brand Advocacy (BA_d). Factor loadings for all items ranged from 0.450 to 0.670, demonstrating acceptable indicator reliability. Reliability and Validity: Internal consistency was confirmed with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the 0.70 threshold.

Table 1 Results of calculation of direct influence, indirect influence and total influence

Dependent variable	Effects	Independent variable					
		Marketing Communication	Customization	Trendiness	Interaction	Brand Awareness	Brand Image
Brand Awareness	Direct Effect	0.15	0.20	0.30	0.30	-	-
	Indirect Effect	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Total Effect	0.15	0.20	0.30	0.30	-	-
Brand Image	Direct Effect	0.12	0.22	0.20	0.22	0.25	-
	Indirect Effect	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.07	-	-
	Total Effect	0.16	0.27	0.27	0.29	0.25	-
Brand Advocacy	Direct Effect	-	-	-	-	0.33	0.67
	Indirect Effect	0.16	0.25	0.28	0.30	-	-
	Total Effect	0.16	0.25	0.28	0.30	0.33	0.67

Further analysis showed that Interaction and Trendiness were the most effective stimuli, being the only two that had a significant positive influence on both Brand Awareness and Brand Image. Hypothesis Testing: The results reveal that Brand Image is the most potent predictor of Brand Advocacy (Total Influence = 0.67), followed by Brand Awareness (Total Influence = 0.33).

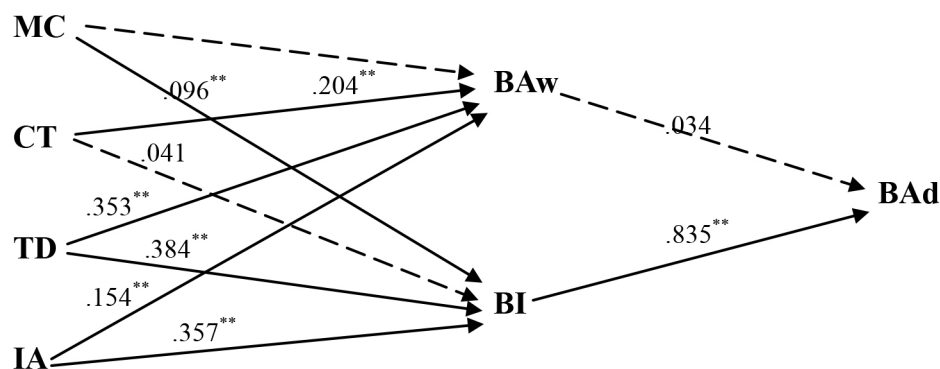


Figure 2 S-O-R of Brand Development Model

Discussion

The findings of this study offer critical insights into the brand dynamics of an established university, moving beyond mere description to explain the mechanisms through which brand equity is built and activated. This research makes its most significant theoretical contribution by refining Keller's (2013) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model for mature institutions. The empirical data reveals that for a university like Silpakorn, the relationship between brand elements is hierarchical and non-linear. The insignificant link between brand awareness and advocacy suggests that for established brands, awareness is a foundational prerequisite but offers diminishing returns as a strategic lever. The true competitive arena, as demonstrated by the data, lies in the upper echelons of the CBBE pyramid: building a rich, positive brand image that cultivates brand resonance, expressed here as brand advocacy. This extends existing theory by proposing that as a brand matures, the strategic imperative must shift from breadth to depth.

Interpreting why certain branding activities were more effective provides further nuance. The emergence of interaction and trendiness as the primary drivers of brand image validates the contemporary view of branding as a co-created, experiential phenomenon. The strength of interaction confirms the core tenets of Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), suggesting that students no longer see themselves as passive recipients of an education. Instead, their perception of the brand is actively constructed through every touchpoint—from digital engagement to classroom dialogue. This is why interaction directly builds image. Similarly, trendiness functions as a powerful heuristic for institutional vitality and relevance. In a rapidly changing world, students perceive a “trendy” university not as frivolous, but as one that is adaptive and connected to the future, making their educational investment feel secure and forward-looking (Beverland, 2009). The finding that customization influenced

awareness but not image points to a strategic dissonance: students are aware that options exist, but this functional attribute has not been successfully translated into an emotional brand benefit. It is perceived as a feature on a list, not as a core part of the university's student-centric identity.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the data provides a static snapshot and prevents the establishment of definitive causality. While our S-O-R model posits that a strong Image (Organism) leads to Advocacy (Response), it is equally plausible that students who are already advocates are predisposed to view the university's image more favorably (reverse causality). Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for a balanced interpretation of the results; they do not invalidate the findings, but they do define the boundaries of their generalizability.

Conclusion and Implications

This study successfully validates the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework as a robust tool for deconstructing the complexities of university. Its primary theoretical contribution lies in refining brand equity theory for established institutions, demonstrating that brand image eclipses brand awareness as the pivotal driver of brand advocacy. This challenges a linear marketing funnel approach and underscores the necessity of building deep, meaningful brand associations.

The practical implications for Silpakorn University's management are direct and actionable. The primary directive is to pivot strategic resources from broad awareness campaigns to targeted, image-building initiatives. The central goal must be to shape a perception of Silpakorn as not just historic, but as a dynamic, innovative institution rooted in a creative soul. This requires: 1) Investing in the Student Experience: Recognizing that every interaction co-creates the brand, the university must meticulously manage all touchpoints—from digital platforms to academic advising—to ensure they are positive and reflective of the desired brand image. 2) Amplifying relevance: The university must strategically communicate its "trendiness" by showcasing cutting-edge research, modern programs, and student success stories through authentic, student-centric channels. 3) Narrating customization: The feature of curriculum customization must be woven into a compelling brand story about student empowerment and personalized pathways, transforming it from a simple fact into a reason to believe in the university's student-centric mission.

In conclusion, this research provides a validated model showing that a community of brand advocates is the direct result of a meticulously cultivated brand image. By focusing on the quality of interactions and the communicated relevance of its offerings, Silpakorn University can build a powerful brand that not only attracts the next generation but transforms them into lifelong champions.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, its limitations illuminate clear pathways for future inquiry.

1) Methodological Limitations. The reliance on convenience sampling restricts the statistical generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ stratified random sampling to ensure a more representative sample of the student body.

2) Contextual and Generalizability Limitation. The single-institution case study design means the findings are specific to Silpakorn's unique context. Replicating this model at other Thai universities with different histories and brand positions would be a crucial next step to test the model's external validity.

3) Scope Limitations. The exclusion of key external stakeholders like alumni and employers represents a significant boundary. Future research should adopt a 360-degree approach, incorporating these perspectives to build a more holistic model of university brand equity.

4) Temporal Limitations. The cross-sectional design cannot capture the dynamic nature of brand perception. A longitudinal study that tracks student perceptions from admission to graduation would provide invaluable insight into how brand image and advocacy evolve over the entire student lifecycle, allowing for a more definitive analysis of causality.

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