

# Multimodality and Social Practices in Institutional Websites of Thai Universities

**BENJAWAN RUNGRUANGSUPARAT**

*Thammasat University*

*Among the higher education institutes in a borderless world of academics, Thai universities have strived to introduce themselves and promote more understanding about their social practices. It has been assumed that merely the highlighted materials and distinctive landscapes were mainly communicated. Yet, the social practices were also presented in multimodal sites where global viewers could controllably investigate and arbitrarily interpret the underlying messages through given signifiers and contextual frame settings. The objective of this study was to explain how the multimodal texts were employed in presenting the social practices by the academic institutions' websites in Thailand, one of South East Asia countries. The data collection covered the homepages, the introduction/about, news and event webpages of eight Thai university websites in four different parts of Thailand from March 16 to June 1, 2016. Two critical analysis tools, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and Frame Analysis (Goffman, 1986), were used/adopted to analyze the practices presented in the English websites of the eight Thai universities. The findings disclosed the shared social practices in terms of academic, cultural, social life, institutional ideologies and qualification aspects that were transcended from producers to receivers by visual designs and textual communication. The institutional practices reflected not only the main tasks of educational institutes and their members, but also locally cultural factors and public relations concerns presented in an online media platform.*

**Keywords:** *multimodality, social practices, higher education, websites, Thai universities*

## INTRODUCTION

The social practices were found a part of human lives in both actual and virtual contexts. For viewers who interacted with the online platforms, the websites fulfilled orientation tasks for the visitors, particularly prospective students, by providing scenarios of what they would find and in which contexts they would be situated. From the study on internet language appearance in offline texts as advertising tools (Lee, 2015), it was commented that digital discourse, like any form of literacy, did not only stay in one spatial domain. It traveled between domains of life and cut across genres and spatial boundaries. In this sense, the

online media platform requires multi-skills of consumption, evaluation and acquisition of navigation from one to another part in the same webpage and across multiple webpages interweaving stories in different forms such as news reports and corporate overview. The various genres are provided through ordinal design of menus and contents classification and approachable by hyperlink icons – interactive items leading to concerning information in other webpages or websites. Therefore, the viewers rely on several tools including verbal instructions, visual aids and humans' sensory modes – viewing, listening and touching – in order to interact with the online multimedia presentation.

As changing lifestyle of people is increasingly influential to a wide range of socio-economic sectors around the world, selves and our possession presentation occupy digital space accessible at anywhere and anytime with technological supports as fundamental gadgets of the 21<sup>st</sup> century education and society. Unlike other business units' production and operation, the universities as educational institutes produce academic programs and certify the graduate outcomes with their procedures and approval. These days the combination of interdisciplinary fields in highly competitive academic spheres involves investigation and expectation of institutional stakeholders who are not only educators and learners, but also academic partnering institutes. The necessity to take a unique position among all the players in the same industry is in line with Hickson & Jennings (1993) who comment on corporate survival that the business institute must respond to the requirements and aspiration of its internal factors such as increasing operational costs, insufficient number of qualified staff and external environment (e.g. a higher number of competitors and a smaller size of target customers to nurture organizational sustainability).

To communicate with public audiences who possibly become alliances and members of university networks, the universities in non-native English speaking countries tend to provide their official websites offering meaningful contents in English medium. Other than the verbal statements, van Riel & Balmer (1997) argue that organizations also employ illustrations in creating their identities since many corporate identity practitioners choose to use the graphic design that greatly contributes to visual communication. In Thailand, the public universities that have been more autonomous with decreasingly financial support from the government recognize the difficulty in pronouncing their existence among other comparable choices. The graphic design then plays a more critical role in embracing the brands and impressive illustrations in viewers' minds. Regarding the components of identity construction, van Dijk (1998) states that ideological domains are the social factors employed to identify group identity, implement activities, recognize shared goals, interrelate with relevant communities, and ratify their power and resources managed.

Furthermore, the underlying concept results in identity representation of a corporate. The communication of organizational identity is often employed to show that institutional members were generally convinced of their institute whose significant attributes were different from other corporations' and consistent throughout a period of time in diverse situations (Alvesson, 2011). This concept is also applied to the educational sector nowadays. Nevertheless, the institutional discourses of Thai universities presented in the online space were rarely investigated and criticized regarding the social practices shared among educational members. It is worth exploring how Thai universities as parts of globally educational communities could reflect the local ideologies and other interesting practices unknown to many international visitors in the digital space. Analyzing the institutional websites of Thai universities to elicit the social practices was the focus of this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The university websites have become the window exhibiting the ongoing narratives of social practices. The relevant literatures include the following topics.

### ***Corporate Branding and Higher Educational Institutes***

With the significance of institutional communication and academic organizations, the institutional images are paid attention to and rely on a set of communicative patterns. According to Keller (1998), a corporate image was a result of eleven factors including: (1) communications (e.g. advertising, publicity and promotions), (2) corporate business conduct, such as reputation and management quality, (3) institutional social conduct (e.g. environment, citizenship and quality of life), (4) contributions conduct of companies, such as charities and arts organizations, (5) institutional employees conduct (e.g. respect and advancement), (6) support to client training and consultation, (7) communication channels regarding locations, service and competence, (8) products attributes, outcomes, compliance, sustainability, quality, dependability, repairability, and style, (9) service (e.g. installation, repair quality and time, and availability of parts), (10) sales manpower in terms of quantity and scope, capability, civility, trustworthiness and sensitivity, and (11) value related to price, fee discount, reimbursement, and financial terms.

For Hatch & Schultz (2001), the corporate branding program becomes successful when stakeholders' feeling of belongings and recognizing of brand value exist. Yet, Kapferer (1992) argues that the continuing process of marketing and

branding for products are the key to succeeding in advertising the products in a long-run. Shahri (2011) also mentions that not only the implicative components of plural stakeholders but also the critical role and supreme accountability of CEO activate the corporate brand.

Referring to the definition of brand given on the Northern Illinois University (NIU)'s website (2014), a brand is an overall experience about a product, service or organization, and reveals a unique identity that diverts the branded unit from the competitors in the marketplace. The statement of NIU agrees with the comments of Marks (2012) on branding for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) that a strong brand can support HEIs in presenting institutes as distinctive or even exceptional among other choices in the same industry. Therefore, NIU (2014) further remarks that strategic application of reliable, branded communication becomes a key part of NIU's future accomplishment in admission, fundraising and image management.

These emphasize the importance of universities' mission nowadays that synergizes marketing and their brands for boosting numbers of new students and cash flows from alumni as well as sponsorship. Madichie & Kolo (2013) state that the corporate identity is important as it is one of the strategies for higher educational institutions' survival in a competitive market like United Arab Emirates.

### ***Multimodality Discourse Analysis and Ideologies***

This paper recognizes dynamic movement of institutional websites as the interactions between the conceptual ideas and identity communication in multimodal presentation. This agrees with Jones (2009) who suggests that "sites of display are inherently 'ideological' - that they help to construct social realities in which certain kinds of social practices and social identities are possible and others are not" (p.116).

Importance of multimodality in human language and linguistic research is more critically driven by Kress et al. (2005). A multimodal approach to sense-making offers more precise and more complete concepts of languages and else (Kress et al., 2005:2). From this perspective, a wider range of opportunity to interpret insightful meanings is provided by considering paralinguistics rather than depending on verbal texts. Nonetheless, interpreting any underlying, uncovered messages with insufficient awareness of written forms and structures could possibly lead to a pitfall in communication and interpretation.

In a broader view, Bezemer (2012) asserts that multimodality is an interdisciplinary methodology for understanding communication and image that are

beyond languages. Upon the cultural text representations on media, Denzin (1992) suggests that cultural understanding supports stories and subjects. Furthermore, different forms of media or information technology transform the authentic experience and its representations. Furthermore, Kress et al. (2005:21) state that insightful elements of multi-modes are taken regarding one's culture to reach a specific goal. Multimodality relies on the hypothesis that meaning was created through the multiple means as called modes to form a culture for that purpose. In this sense, the cultural interpretation requires verbal and visual combination and presentation structures.

Under the surface level of text interpretations, Bezemer (2012) explains that a multimodal methodology framework relied on making senses in multi-sensory modes of communication including verbal, visual, and kinetic in forms of a written or spoken format to represent the meanings in a diversity of situations. This is in line with Kress (2010) who explains that the multiple means of visual tools were composed "to present, to realize, on occasion to (re-) contextualize social positions, social relations, and *knowledge* in specific displays for a particular audience".

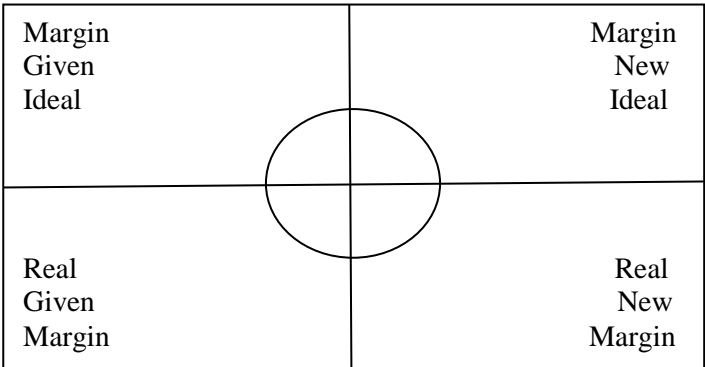
In addition, it was recommended that the frequently used modes covered both linguistic and paralinguistic codes such as color, movement, snap images and audio files with 3D effects. Nevertheless, these should suitably serve purposes on representation and communication (Kress, 2010). Taking vigorous moves of social learning and technology in retrieving knowledge in this era, Merchant (2015) advises that literacies are growingly multiple, multimodal, portable, and communicated via new equipment. Identifying the hyperlink features of online discourse platform, Adami (2013) remarks that "Signs in a text are usually meant to be interpreted. As images are meant to be observed, written language is meant to be read to produce its effects. Interactive sites/signs, instead, are meant to be acted upon rather than, or along with, being interpreted" (p. 5).

In this sense, visual images were not a definite substitute of verbal messages. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006:61) argue that usually the process is represented only visually, and the written text either does not paraphrase it at all, or provide contradictory or even misleading glosses. In a previous study, Kress et al. (2005) agree that there is a possibility in interpretation among readers with varied background in a way that people as sign-makers of all signs recognize their own pasts and attention. As a result, interpretations always vary, while all encoders pay our attention to the sign-making. In addition, Halliday (1978) attests that the culture forms our behavior models, and a great matter of our performance was mediated through languages.

Furthermore, van Dijk (2006) argues that ideology is a belief system that is communicated and commonly recreated in their members' social practices and more specifically acquired, guaranteed, altered and achieved through discourse. From these scholars' perspectives, analyzing texts takes all linguistic elements from a single unit to united elements of content and context into consideration.

In Djonov's study (2005), the reading paths and the multimodal components of the children websites were investigated to understand audiences' interactions and promote producers' development. In this study, the verbal and visual elements were analyzed to identify the website patterns that were shared and specific designs including the components and the represented practices consisting of participants, activities, tools and events.

Regarding data analysis of multimodal discourse, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that the visual presentation was meaningfully positioned in the spatial map in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Spatial map (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

The highlighted themes are expected to stand in the left part of the visual space as the given information, whereas the new contents follow the given ones in the right part. At the same time, the top part is interpreted as the ideal area conveying conceptual meanings. On the other hand, the bottom part is occupied by the real contents. The central space is generally the first point of viewers' eye contact; meanwhile, the margin is around the corners.

To explore the multimodal activities presented on the online platforms that contain ideologies, Djonov (2005) studied the identity communication of the children oriented homepages through the cropping images and repetitiveness of names, illustrations and represented participants. Also, Knox (2009) states that the webpages are likely to employ both visual and verbal codes possessing

semiotic signs in order to present concrete stance to the viewers in various ways.

In addition, semiotics can be applied to elaborate the concept of sign to identity. Harrison (2003) and Otubanjo (2012) describe benefits of a semiotic view used for understanding corporate identity because signs can make people recognize the processes in which the organizational truth is constructed and the functions are performed by the institutions in creating these realities. According to Widdowson (2004), 'language above the clause' is significantly different from 'language above the sentence' that involves language patterns further than a scope of conventional grammar. Nevertheless, separate parts of texts without complete parts of sentences such as noun phrases potentially contains a meaningful sense that relies on interpretation of contexts. This kind of cases highlights the specification of texts that are borderless to grammatical justification and any definite boundary. In other words, the pragmatic meanings of any forms of communication required non-verbal components that are not limited to symbolic codes, but also circumstances.

Taking discourse analysis into an educational sphere, Blommaert (2005) identifies that "universities nowadays market themselves with arguments pertaining to such patterns of communication -- intensive tutoring, excellent, abundant, and affordable course materials, opportunities for independent research, and so on" (p.133). In this sense, higher education institutes need to position themselves among others with strategic representation.

When Edelman (2007) analyzed the airline's brochures created for promoting tourism in Australia, it was found that the image of activities mostly reflected facilities and indoor illustration in the cities whereas the pictures of outreach areas presented natural resources and outdoor activities. These disclose some differences of represented settings and scenes in which actors experience practices at two types of touristic locations. Yet, the chosen illustration can be interpreted by various perspectives of viewers with a diverse socio-cultural background.

### ***Self-presentation and frame analysis***

In the society, all social frameworks are related to regulations (Goffman, 1986). In this sense, Goffman emphasizes that guided 'doing' is an important instructional set required throughout the process and relies on a goal of that mission. According to Goffman (1959), an identity of a person was projected by his/her own when entering into a floor of social practices. Everyone interacted with one another in an expected role with assigned and proper reaction.

Goffman (1986) further explains that the individuals and their taken roles are interrelated and adaptable to varied situations for managing selves. This means that multiple selves are manipulated at times depending on designated needs and encountered circumstances.

Furthermore, the specialized agents having particular interests utilized capital relating to wealth for managing institutional equipment, dominating with devices of channels and critically manipulating resources in the field, and then bringing to profit creation. These social practices and relevant parties or agents play interactive roles to each other towards the goals relating to power and social equality (Bourdieu, 1972). From this perspective, the attempts to explain critical relationships between social factors and underlying ideologies demand much more information as prior acknowledgement and intertexts.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The multimodal presentation of eight Thai university websites, representing the longest established and most recognized public and private universities in four main regions of Thailand, was analyzed. The objective was to elicit social practices including main objective and cultural aspects presented in the English version of Thai university websites. The practices were presented through physical objects, engaging materials and represented behaviors.

### ***Research scope***

The homepages, the sections of about/introduction, student/campus life and news/events were examined to figure out the institutional practices resulting from multimodal communication through the online platforms. While the university homepages collected multi-topics related to the shared ongoing information, the news/events sections occupied the largest space of the homepage layout. Also, the about/introduction webpages mainly described the institutional stories from the beginning era. In addition, the student/campus life webpages tended to show the viewers what the universities provided for their current and new members regarding the facilities, particularly accommodation, transportation and information and technology centers.

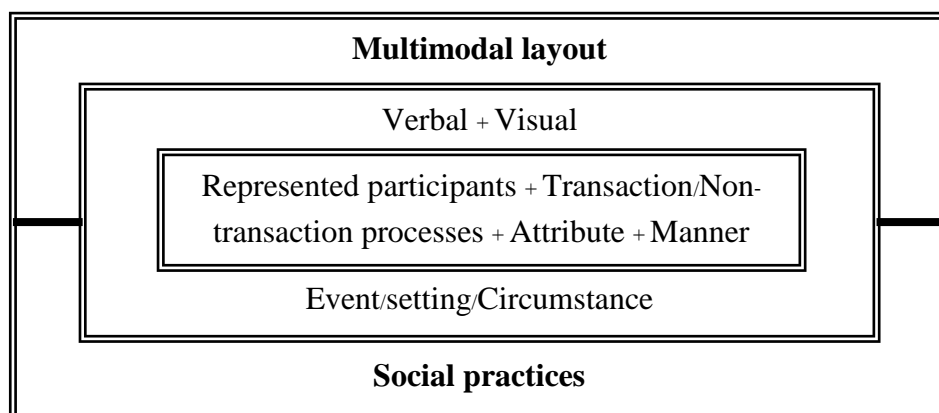
The data in this study was consistently collected from March 16 to June 1, 2016, totaling 12 weeks, as according to St. Pierre and Jackson (2014), qualitative data had changed throughout the time. Some had remained unchanged or even reproduced. Nonetheless, the collected data excludes video clips.



## Research framework

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the visual narrative could be classified into both transactional and non-transactional processes. While the transactional processes require actions and target object(s), the non-transactional ones influence none of the objects. Not only the transactional process conveyed the activities that implied what the institutions did, but also the surrounding sets of possessions and situations involved promoted practices and implementation. This study also used the spatial map or information value framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) for visual design analysis as shown in Figure 1.

Apart from multimodal discourse analysis, lenses employed to investigate the overview of the university homepages' layouts, the frame analysis concept was taken into consideration for analyzing the social practices found in the data within the research scope. However, the technical effects of Web 3.0 and 4.0 that aimed to utilize the digital platforms for independently creating contents and processing commercial transactions were not a core of the current study. Also, reading paths and hyperlink mechanism were not taken into account for analyzing the data in this study.



**Figure 2** Research framework (adapted from Bourdieu, 1972; Goffman, 1959, 1986; Halliday, 1978; Kress et al., 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

As shown in Figure 2, the multimodal layout contains both verbal and visual elements to illustrate components of events including participants, actions, qualities (postures and costumes) and accompanied materials. Even though the contents found in the university websites consisted of both verbal and visual texts, the visual representation through photographs and multimedia played a crucial role in snapping the event venues and components of happening or

imaginative phenomena. These contribute to explanation of the social practices presented in the institutional platforms.

### ***Sample selection***

The sample websites representing eight Thai universities were investigated. According to Charmaz (2003), the way to validate the developed concepts was possible regardless of sample numbers when initial sampling of theory justifies a clearer view of the research scope. Moreover, Devers & Frankel (2000) argue that purposive sampling techniques are designed to develop understandings of chosen individuals or groups' knowledge or for constructing theories and notions.

In this study, the public and private universities were purposively selected from four main parts of Thailand. The public institutes that were longest found in the central, northern, north-eastern and southern parts included Chulalongkorn University (CU), Chiang Mai University (CMU), KhonKaen University (KKU) and Prince of Songkla University (PSU) respectively (Figures 3 – A, B, C & D). The private institutions that provided the English information in the official websites comprised Asia-pacific International University (APIU), Assumption University (AU), Hatyai University (HU) and Payap University (PYU) as shown in Figures 4 – A, B, C & D). All the public universities were recognized by the local people and international ranking agencies regarding their academic performances and other evaluative criteria.

A



B





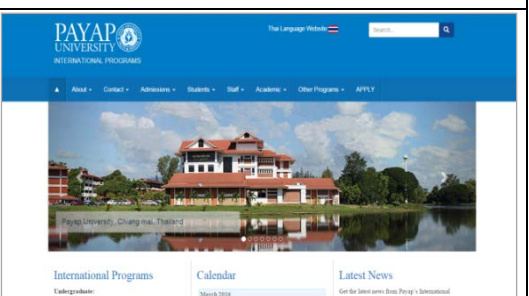
C

D

**Figure 3** English homepages of four Thai public universities, namely... (A), ... (B), ... (C), and ... (D)  
 (Retrieved from A- <http://www.chula.ac.th/en/>; B- <http://cmu.ac.th/en/index.php>;  
 C- <https://www.kku.ac.th/index.php?l=en&fs=y>; D- <http://www.en.psu.ac.th/>)

A

B



C

D

**Figure 4** English homepages of four Thai private universities, namely... (A), ... (B), ... (C), and ... (D) (Retrieved from A- <http://www.apiu.edu>; B- <http://www.au.edu>; C- <http://www.hu.ac.th/english>; D- <http://ic.payap.ac.th>)

## FINDINGS

As mentioned in the research scope, the analysis specifically considered the university websites regarding functionalities of Web 1.0 and 2.0 (Nations, 2017). These Webs provided information through online texts and promoting two-way communication via shared space as bulletin boards that transfer the viewers to other social media platforms (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). In addition, the given icons only linked the institutional websites with the emailing service windows for non-immediate responses. These full features were rooted in non-academic websites, and they were not analyzed in the results.

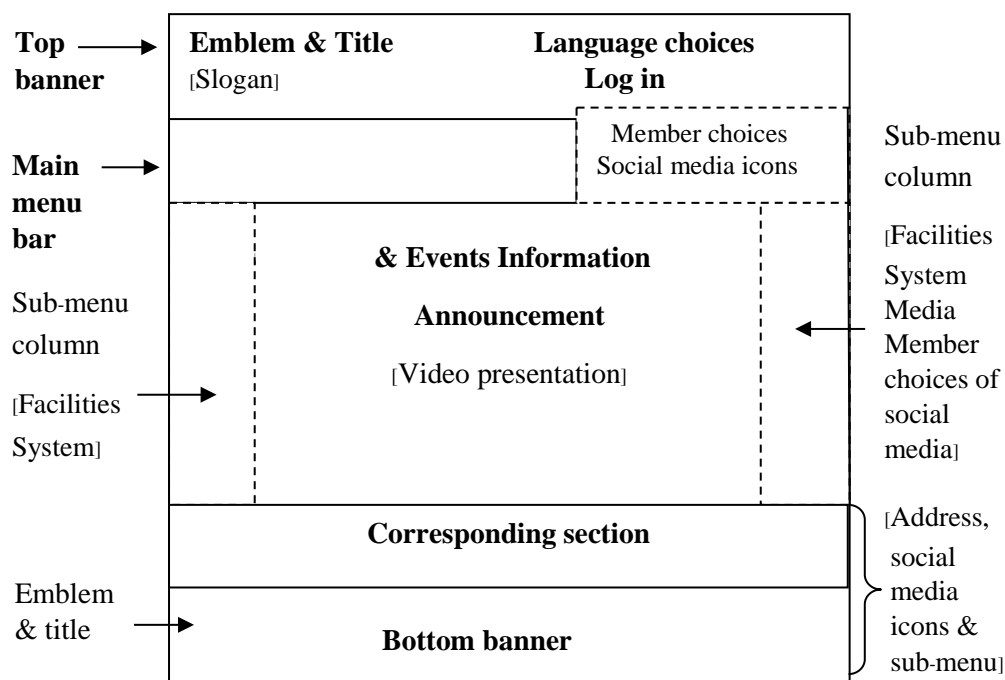
The findings include three parts that were visual patterns of the university homepage as virtual introduction, institutional practices as represented contents for viewers, and participants of institutional practices in represented situations.

- **Visual pattern of university homepages as virtual introduction**

For viewers who never reach the university campuses and learn new things happening around the academic communities, the institutional homepages seem to be the most reliable source to find basic information. Saichaie (2011) comments that university websites are widely argued to be a virtual place for the institution that serves as the provider of intellectual development, leadership opportunities, and career preparation, not the individual qualities of the students.

Among the filled templates of the university homepages presenting the English information to the global audiences as shown in Figure 5, the top banners were the ideal space containing the institutional emblems, titles and slogans that mainly acknowledged their conceptual ideologies. Below the top banner space was the wide, which was investigable by the viewers.

In case that the homepages were longer than the computer screen shot, the viewers could scroll down the homepages to learn more information about the institutional practices through news and events shared around the central space. However, these components were not placed at the top of the homepages as the Ideal information but holistically occupied the largest landscape of the digital platforms. In the end of the homepages were institutional signatures similar to the business letter genre that emphasized the real position and location of the institutes by stating their postal and email address for further communication.



**Figure 5** Homepage pattern of Thai university websites

The status checking options were offered to the viewers around the New part or the right side of the university homepages as shown in Figures 3-A and 3-C. Nevertheless, the types of viewers such as 'Faculty & Staff' and 'Parents' were classified in the Given part or the left section (see Figure 4-B and Figure 4-C). As shown in Figure 3-A, Figure 4-B, and Figure 4-D, the viewer types such as 'Prospective Students', 'Visitors' and 'Guardian' were placed across the central area along the top banner and the main menu bars. The check-in or login menu found in the different institutional homepages (see Figure 3-B, Figure 3-C and Figure 4-B) were either the position below the top banner near the language choices or the right menu column near the scrolling bar of the online window. Yet, the center of the whole space discussed the ongoing activities sooner happening, effectively run or completely finished.

According to the spatial map of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the central area of the homepages of Thai universities contains news and events information that is presented in a combination of verbal codes and visual elements to acknowledge the viewers. The top space normally portrayed the Ideal information of the institutions mottos and slogans in forms of the emblems and verbal codes embracing their brands.

As mentioned before, the university websites incorporated into social practices into the institutional presentation. These presentations were not limited to static formats but interactive effects of sliding features of which the information was provided and selected by the viewers. For many homepages (AU, CMU, CU, HU, KCU and PYU), the viewers were able to manually click upon the signs to switch the news stories or full descriptions. Also, they could follow further contents through hyperlink responsiveness that came up with the new webpages. These continual processes were called digital interactions and practices known by the online users nowadays.

Table 1 shows the features of the university homepages to present to present the combination of multimodal texts in the university homepages.

**Table 1**  
**Multimodal features of the university homepages**

Features	Verbal	Visual
Announcement	Program, date, time	Multimedia images
Bottom banner	Title	Emblem, theme color, social media icon
Corresponding section	Mailing address, email address, telephone number	Social media icons
Image presentation	Caption & short messages	Photo& multimedia images
Main menu	Menu list	Symbolic code, theme color
News/events	Title sections, headlines, hyperlink instructions	Photo & multimedia images, hyperlink icons
Sub menu	Menu list	Image
Top banner	Title & slogan	Emblem, theme color, image of statue

The co-occurrence of visual and verbal texts was naturally found in each spatial component in the university homepages. The Ideal at the top of the homepages revealed conceptual ideas of the universities through visual design and institutional titles. Within this space, the institutional statements that related to series of underlying practices were embraced. Nonetheless, the colors played the key role in stipulating the institutional identities. In Figure 3-C, the orange banner reflects Khon Kaen University's color and embedded the anniversary slogan '50 years of devotion'.

From Figure 3-C, the corporate business practices were represented in the major space of the Real information occupying from the left to the central area across the homepage. This photo image included the background of the cultural hall far behind the key participant who was placed on the right as the New part of the

frame. The left, on the other hand, represents the Given information of the ranking list for Thai universities.

From all samples as classified in Table 2, the central layout was mostly found in the webpages of news and activity through hyperlinks from the homepages.

**Table 2**  
**Layout of the eight Thai university webpages**

Thai University Webpages	Public University				Private University			
	CU	CMU	KKU	PSU	AU	APIU	HU	PYU
About/Introduction	R	R	R	C	L	L	L	R
Student/Campus/ Facilities/Accommodation	R	C	R	C	L	L	L	R
News	R	C	R	C	L	C	C	R
Activity	R	C	R	C	L	C	C	L

\*R = Right; C = Central; L = Left

This expresses the authorial intents to provide the viewers with the full contents of practices that shared participants, processes, and settings through multimodal texts of news reporting and short script genres. Regarding the About and Facilities information, the private universities tended to portray the webpages in the left orientation. In contrast, the right orientation was mostly used by the public ones.

- **Institutional practices as represented contents for viewers**

In general, the online presentation of the informative websites mainly served the viewers with useful contents in their ways of visual designs and verbal texts. However, the commonly found features were related to interactiveness. In this sense, what is presented in the visual banners tells viewers how to interact with the verbal themes offered through the university websites. The arrows that signaled the movement were given to allow the viewers to slide the banner images and scroll up and down to what they wanted to investigate. These interactive icons were normally provided around the margins of the presentation space that compassed the presentation at the center of the images. Comparing to the written form of online addresses and digital processes, visual elements were more dominant by interactive response when the cursers were placed upon the hyperlinks.

The institutional practices in the university websites feature the meaningful contents which consist of academics, culture, social life, institutional ideologies, and qualification.



### **Academics**

Formats of learning on campus represented in the university homepages included formal lectures, seminars and self-study at the library and computer rooms. Furthermore, the learners were presented in group activities with their classmates as well as counselor service with the faculty and service staff. These reflect the dominant roles of the represented participants who are students in uniforms and institutional colored neckties in an academic setting as shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6** Students in uniforms and institutional colored neckties in an academic setting  
(Source: <http://www.au.edu/media/k2/categories/87.jpg>)

As the main tasks of the institutions were to educate the students, the system of online learning and video clips sharing the knowledge and research advancement were found in the university websites. The multimodal features were important in this aspect when the research findings and researchers' successes were promoted. Merely the visual photographs of the congratulation shots were not sufficient to explain what achievements were done by the institutional members and what contributions were recognized to public interests. The verbal texts of reward titles and significance of the research goals and participated competitions were accomplished. These, at the same time, promoted the roles of academic members as well as institutional appreciation to personal dedication on behalf of the institutions and their attempts to create social benefits.

### **Culture**

As Helder (2011:12) argues that participants' life-worlds (individually cognitive conception) influence their text construction and interpretation, these emphasize importance of two roles taken by authors and readers. Moreover, Helder comments that those processes did not symmetrically reveal relations to social matters and reality but discursive ones based on experiences of individuals. This means that both producers and viewers differed in personal backgrounds. Practically, textual analysts could follow Chaney's (1996:62) three steps including identifying text attributes, categorizing those features into classified types and deconstructing 'cultural meanings' of the texts.



In this study, culture refers to social norms and values related to local communities' traditions. The cultural aspect found in the university websites was transcended through multiple kinds of events and programs. Particularly, the graduation ceremonies were chaired and awarded by the royal family members as parts of their missions for Thai society and new graduates to keep a royal monarchy-people relationship as well as dedicate time for blessing and advice for career starting points. These academic programs had been overlapped with the cultural norms of Thai higher education for many decades since the era of King Rama IX with his name King Bhumibol.

At the same time, the opening programs of new buildings on the university campuses were officially launched by the royal members who performed as the honorable and respectful guests as important as the religious representatives who were invited to take part in the important events.

The cultural events of other countries were shared in the university websites to invite their members for participation. Figure 7 shows a cultural dance as one part of the sports event. The neighboring countries' flags are also decorated on the wall behind the stage. The background supports the multicultural activities promoted among ASEAN universities.



**Figure 7** Cultural dance on the sports game

(Source: [http://multimedia.hu.ac.th/memory/events/59/067/HU/img/thumbs/HU\\_029.jpg](http://multimedia.hu.ac.th/memory/events/59/067/HU/img/thumbs/HU_029.jpg))

Exchange programs and short courses during the summer semester were also promoted to the inbound and outbound students in forms of visual image posters. In the posters, either foreign architectures or international students were presented with a large size program titles and short details about the time period and course names. As the cultures were combined with the educational programs, these could be analyzed verbally as same as the academic category. However, this study considered the visual including cultural representation

through physical objects, multicultural figures of participants and their costumes.

In the cultural events, Songkran festival or Thai New Year holidays was one of the special occasions joining by the President wearing Thai silk and patterned cloths reflecting the practices of gratitude expression from the younger generations to the elders of the institutional community. This system of respects has been found in Buddhism practices throughout the Kingdom of Thailand where a majority of citizens officially register or label themselves as Buddhists. The young and followers with less power status should pay respect to the elders who have longer life experiences. This also applies to the monks who control themselves in stricter practices and are considered as the holy representatives of Buddha fellowship. The concerned set of Buddhism practices shared among local and international visitors found in the university websites were temple tours and food offering to the monks.

In these events, the participants showed their respects to the Buddha images by doing Wai and lowering their heads in a humble manner. When offering food to the monks who sat or stood, the participants carefully gave the sets of food and beverage by trying not to raise their bodies higher than the monks' heads and touch any part of their bodies regarding the Buddha's disciplines. These ways at the same time complied with Thai culture of elderly caretaking and seniority system at educational institutes transcended from the past century generations to the following ones.

### ***Social life***

Social life aspect refers to the ways of lives in which the institutional members were presented. Besides academic tasks, the student life involved free time out of classes. However, many images included communicative gadgets such as tablets and notebooks in the scenes of student groups mingling in the natural environment.

Figure 8 represents the virtual context of on-campus students who spent their time with academic gadgets (an in-use textbook and laptop). The place in which the participants are situated illustrates the green, comfortable space in front of the imaginative building with the students' posture and eyesight looking far beyond the frame. This composition conveys a message of a happy learning atmosphere even when the learners are out of classes with the aim of inviting the viewers to positively draw up the future perspective of their socialization.



**Figure 8** Social life of university students  
(Source: [http://cmu.ac.th/images/life/cmul\\_06.jpg](http://cmu.ac.th/images/life/cmul_06.jpg))

Another mode of their lives was related to transportation choices – the universities located in the capital city presented information about sky-train and subway routes; meanwhile, the institutes in the upcountry and touristic areas highlighted cultural modes of motor-tricycles called Tuk-tuk and also mini-pickup car, namely song-taew, as local way of commuting from/to campuses. Yet, the university coaches were commonly mentioned by the universities whose campuses were at the central part of the country. On the other hand, the open-air tram was often shown as on-campus vehicles by the others situated in the north and the south. The ways of transportation as one of the daily life routines on the university campus were labeled with the institutional colors. In Figure 9, the red tram was presented with the students in the university uniform as key participants and usual passengers.



**Figure 9** Open-air trams on the campus  
(Source: <http://www.hu.ac.th/images/facilities/car.PNG>)

### ***Institutional ideologies***

Unlike the cultural aspect eliciting from the non-academic activities, institutional ideologies were evidently encoded in the emblems, slogans and symbolic landscapes. These elements mostly appeared at the top of the homepages and

stamped upon the photographs of facilities to verify the institutional belongings. The emblems were designed to incorporate ideologies of the educational institutes involving knowledge, merits through symbolic codes of a torch, a book, and a tree. Historically, the public universities determined the specifically designed symbols such as Phra Kiew in case of Chulalongkorn University referring to the royal monarchy representation (Figure 3-B). Also, the elephant was the key icon of the emblem besides the verbal code of motto on the website of CMU (Figure 3-A).

For private universities, three (APIU, AU and HY) from four websites employed colorful, symbolic items in representing institutional emblems (Figures 4-A, 4-B and 4-C) with the meanings that reflected the ideologies. The features of symbols and the interpretation was fully given in the About webpage. For example, AU valued Ashoka Tree as an institutional tree that conveyed the determination of the university to accomplish the goals for learners who studied with quality and high merit.

The slogans of the universities expressed the signified roles of their core missions, for example, *Pillars of the Kingdom* (Chulalongkorn University, 2016) in Figure 3-B, and *University of Excellence Where Nature Nurtures Beautiful Intelligence* (Chiang Mai University, 2016) in Figure 3-A. These imply the signified roles of the institutions as reliance and wealthy resources contributing to the whole part of the country and ideological wisdom of the institutional members in well-positioned and facilitated environments.

Regarding the distinctive landmark of each university, the symbolic icons and institutional key persons were concretely constructed in the wide space near the management office or around the center space of the campuses. For instance, the statue of Prince of Songkla (in the circle in Figure 10) whose name was entitled for PSU as the public university in the southern part of Thailand was situated in front of the office building of the President where the foreign partners and local guests would see when approaching the main entrance of the main campus.



**Figure 10** Prince of Songkla statue on Prince of Songkla University's main campus  
 (Source: [http://www.en.psu.ac.th/modules/mod\\_image\\_show\\_gk4/cache/inter-news.2016.04.en-banner-59-4-26gk-is-87.jpg](http://www.en.psu.ac.th/modules/mod_image_show_gk4/cache/inter-news.2016.04.en-banner-59-4-26gk-is-87.jpg))

In Figure 11, the bottom caption of the event stipulates the location of the photo image, 'at PSU', whereas the visual background of the Prince of Songkla statue shows the institutional landmark emphasizing where all the key participants arrive and physically connect with. In addition, Figure 11 shows the meeting room background in the group photo shoot scene in which foreign partner representatives were together with Thai host executives of PSU.



**Figure 11** Visitor group shoot in the meeting room at PSU  
 (Source: [http://www.en.psu.ac.th/images/thumbnails/images/inter-news/2016/03/11/1/05\\_German\\_U-517x279.jpg](http://www.en.psu.ac.th/images/thumbnails/images/inter-news/2016/03/11/1/05_German_U-517x279.jpg))

### ***Qualification***

Qualification of the institutions and their members were represented by referring to global university ranking tables from multiple sources. Yet, the President was the positioning actor and the post-modernist architectures or distinctive landscapes were represented with those records. These revealed the

accompanying choices of academic reliability presentation by leadership of the management and non-human agency performing on behalf of the organizations.

On the contrary, three of the four private universities (APIU, AU and PYU) in this study incorporated their educational objectives rooted in Christian community and foundation.

On PYU's campus at Mae Kaw district, in Chiang Mai Province, the figure of chapel in Figure 12 was employed to signify religious orientation of its student life and became the background of the poster of graduation ceremony notice as where the program would be held for the upcoming batch of the graduating students.



**Figure 12** Payap University's Chapel

(Source: [http://ic.payap.ac.th/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Bacc2016\\_FrontPage-211x300.jpg](http://ic.payap.ac.th/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Bacc2016_FrontPage-211x300.jpg))

- **Participants of institutional practices in represented situations**

From the research question inquiring how the social practices of Thai universities were presented through their institutional websites, the dominant representations consisted of the participants who performed the practices. Regarding the visual presentation in which institutional members performing the institutional practices were represented, participants, attributes (costumes and physical possessions), manners (emotions and facial expressions) and place (landscape and setting) were found as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Participants as social actors of institutional event presentations**

Participants	Attribute	Manner	Place
Student group	in student uniforms, having a tablet	smiley, happily, friendly	terrace, green field, in building, corridor
	in graduation gowns, with the university signboard	happily	in front of a large building & a pond
Individual student	in a casual attire/ a student uniform/ a graduation gown/ a Thai traditional costume	happily, fun, proud, serious, tempting	multimedia background
President	in a business suit, with a necktie/ a Thai silk shirt	smiley, happily, serious	in an indoor background, on the stage
Staff	in colorful shirts/ clothes/dress	fun, lively	at the event sites, in an outdoor space
Executives & visitors	in business attires, in local clothes	smiley, happily, smart, proud, professional	in a meeting room, in front of the landmark/ a building scene
Guest speaker	in a formal attire	friendly, smiley	in a setting screen
Students & Guest speaker	in a formal attire & student uniforms	friendly, smiley	in a lecture room
Mixed members	in smart casual attires	friendly, smiley	in a park, at event sites

The differences between the represented participants who were students and faculty consisted of dress codes and places. The faculties often appeared in the settings of academic activities and specific events, whereas the students who were expected to be future members and current fans stayed alone and in groups in various kinds of practices such as attending the classes, discussing the assignments, having meals at canteens, and joining the extra-curricular events. For the presidents and executive team members, they were around the partners from outside organization in the photograph on a campus visit and signing agreement ceremonies at the meeting room, reception area and institutional landmarks presented in the university websites.

The institutional events held on the campuses reflect environmental concerns and natural resource preservation. These global ideologies were adopted and developed to the campaigns and extra-curricular programs that congregated the students and faculty members with the casual attires suitable for outdoor activities. It was also committed by the universities in Thailand to dedicate their knowledge and collaboration with local communities in preserving local cultures



and supporting local communities in terms of social services in forms of awarding, scholarships, campaigns, projects of teaching and researching. These not only raised awareness of social responsibilities and arts appreciations among their community members and stakeholders, but also provided alternative solutions to problems and developed relationships between the academic members and the nearby communities around the universities' campuses.

Nonetheless, most of all the participants were found in a friendly look with smiling faces and welcoming manners. The direct eye-contact of the represented actors expressed the strong sense of demanding the experiences and facilities to the viewers who visited the university websites. For some specific reasons, pride and prestige communications were conveyed with the presenters who did not look at the camera but instead beyond the frame with their ambitious eyesight and confident postures that asked for viewers' interpretation for non-verbal messages.

The social practices were shared by the institutions through visual images of activities that were organized in the designated settings to allow the viewers to get familiar with event tools and manners of represented participants.

## **DISCUSSION**

In order to establish institutional identities, the Thai universities performed their roles through social practices and presented them through the online platforms. These agree with Keller's corporate image components (Keller 1998). From the websites, the advertising and public relation contents were presented in the sliding images covering the extensive space of the center. The reputation of Thai universities was promoted in forms of news about faculty' academic rewards and world ranking lists. Moreover, the institutional practices concerning social issues such as garbage management and forestation were presented to the online viewers. Also, the voluntary service programs, for instance, teaching primary students and cleaning school toilets, were found in the institutional websites as Thai universities' contribution to the society. For institutional members including staff and students, the practices created to benefit their health and mind included annual sport competition and cheering activities. Also, the seminar on special or interesting topics held for the stakeholders were found as one of varied training programs. The learning outcomes of the universities were the learners, so their qualities were presented in the visual images as the positioning scene of being proud and smart-looking. In addition, the news about student competitions and winning prizes was posted in the



homepages in supporting the images of the universities to show their reliability and strong collaboration with other institutions

According to Hatch & Schultz (2001), there was a relationship between institutional members' awareness of their corporate brand value and successful brand promotion. As a result, the critical participants presented in the university websites mostly appeared in institutional uniforms with their pins and neckties identifying their identity that conveyed senses of their groups. Also, the abbreviation of the university titles such as CMU, PSU was used when sharing the institutional matters in the news headlines posted as well as the photos of universities' properties such as the dormitories and the campus landscapes. Moreover, the on-campus service availability such as the libraries, the institutional vehicles and the computer laboratories was promoted as the scene. Regarding the homepage pattern in Figure 5, the bottom banners' homepages provided physical locations and online service.

While Kapferer (1992) emphasizes the long-term accomplishment of marketing products through endless ongoing process, the university websites in this study focus on their dynamic contents in highlighting their strengths of human resources, students and faculty members.

In the event scenes in which the executives were alone or together with the other guests and members, their leaders' role was established as one of institutional brand. This supports Shahri (2011) that both the management and other members are key role players in branding their institutions.

Nevertheless, the university websites did not display the hard sale characteristics as other commercial business commonly did. The service fee of academic program might be hidden in the sub-menus and excluded from the main visual frame on the homepages. Yet, the short course programs highlighting the students' opportunities to go abroad tended to specify the program costs and detailed covered expenses in the posters shown in the news sections of the homepages. In the same way, the quantitative dimension of the manpower in the universities were presented in facts and figures that were presented under the About section rather than stand-alone icons. However, the more evident part relating to the faculty who were one of the key human resources of the universities appeared in the showcase news about their success and recognition moments of award receiving or official congratulations.

From the findings, the Thai university homepage designs focus on the symbolic items that became parts of the new generation's lives relying on digital gadgets. This agrees with Merchant (2015) that there was a relationship between human users and designated interactions through verbal and movement formats. Also,

the critical role of the tablet (Figures 3-B & 3-C) was to employ multimodal items on the screen as a mediated tool for both education and literacy purposes in today youth.

Similar to Chik's study (2015) on online site analysis for foreign language learning, the architecture of the Thai university websites as online learning sites affects the freedom of the viewers' choices to complete the individual tasks in which the status of users was identified. This implies that the concerned information may be offered to different groups of viewers regarding their stances and obligations towards academic institutions. However, the shared practices for public audiences are provided in the core space of the institutional websites to acknowledge the visitors of who they are and what they do to influence the members and stakeholders in various ways.

For Thai university websites, the different composition of layouts was the evidence of institutional creativity through multimodal design but within the acceptable range of information platform emphasizing on event sharing and image presentation. This is in line with Blommaert (2005) who points out the reason for judging discourse genres as creative texts that "[i]t becomes creative because it is measurable against normative hegemonic standards, because it creates *understandable* contrasts with such standards" (p.106).

These institutional homepages were created in the shared practices that exhibited general combination of visual and verbal elements in the main components. Yet, the specific icons were emphasized in different spaces of the university homepages. Appearance of the royal prince statue was shown in the New part of the PSU website's top banner (Figure 2-4), and the western thinker statue was found in the New part of the HU website's central area. These can be observed as the institutional attempts to concretely showcase their philosophical intermediation that symbolizes desirable characters and links to the transformed missions of the universities.

The represented practices in the university websites served as the social windows that showcased the engaging activities created for institutional members regarding their missions and subsequent objectives. These practices reflect the reality of today's lifestyle of the academic community members that rely on technological supports and physical materials for learning and health promoting purposes. For visiting practices, the key representatives of the universities were faculty and executives. These depended on those guests who appeared for signing agreements or giving lectures to the students. In the latter case, the students became the co-actors in the events presented in the lecture rooms listening to the visiting speakers or in front of the camera as the closing stage of this kind of programs.

The culture was blended with other contents as one of the holistic viewpoints revealed on the online platform of the institutions. However, the communication schemes employed could be found in either apparent or underlying forms that need further interpretation. With regard to cultural elements of Thai context provided in the university websites, the viewers were, nonetheless, guided to get accustomed to Thai tradition and value through visual presentation and also verbal codes of cultural tips in a few university homepages. Critically, the main contents of the university homepages showed the viewers with friendly senses and well supportive equipment on the campuses. As a result, the viewers could simultaneously learn cultural practices shared in the key sources of the public communication. In other words, these university homepages were identified as identity formation as same as Djonov's perspective on the construction of identity in the corporate websites (Djonov 2005).

Even though the English medium is helpful for communicating with the target audiences, a local language was found to be a handful tool for communication with local people who plans to visit the actual sites of Thai universities. Moreover, it was recommended by Ishida & Miller (2015) that localization aimed to customize texts including language, visual image, design, color, symbols and else to satisfy the needs of specific groups of users with different cultural backgrounds from different origins. From this study, the university websites were an international communication tool that reflected Thai ways of presentation and local contents through various practices such as a fancy costume event, mixed cultural fair and guest welcoming activities.

From the multimodal frame surrounding the event presentation of the Thai university websites, local practices were selected to coincide with the academic activities of global institutions that tried to acquire a moral trait by paying attention to contextual agencies that were spiritually influential to local norms. These therefore assisted arriving numbers of guests and partners coming to join Thai university membership with high level of social literacies through the online sites of engagement.

## THE AUTHOR

**Benjawan Rungruangsuparat** is a Ph.D. candidate at the English Language Studies program at Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. She received a bachelor degree in Industrial and Operations Management and a Master's degree in Language and Culture for Communication and Development. Her experiences have been related to international trade and international exchange program.

*bowbenjawan@hotmail.com*

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