Facebook : Communication Behavior of Thai Teenagers in the Public Sphere

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Introduction

Facebook: The New and Highly Popular Social Networking Site

Nowadays, an important internet phenomenon is the expansion of Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook. When considering the usage of Facebook in a Thai context, the study found that Facebook's popularity has grown significantly to the top ranking of the world. Statistical information about the usage of Facebook in Thailand mentioned in the article "Top 10 Biggest Facebook Cities", which was published on June 14, 2012 in Social Bakers, the famous marketing website, says that Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, had become the city with the most Facebook users in the world, with about 8 million users, followed by Jakarta, Indonesia and Istanbul, and Turkey. The information on overall Facebook usage in Thailand displayed in table 1 shows that the country has over 18 million users, which makes it the thirteenth-ranked country in terms of the number of Facebook users in the world.

Table 1: List of countries on Facebook (January 2013)

Rank	Name	Rank	Name	Rank	Name
1	United States	6	United Kingdom	11	Italy
2	Brazil	7	Turkey	12	Argentina
3	India	8	Philippines	*13	**Thailand** Population: 67,089,500 FB.Users: 18,325,500
4	Indonesia	9	France	14	Canada
5	Mexico	10	Germany	15	Colombia

Source :http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/

Teenagers and Facebook

Data for the Thai social context in Figure 1 (see below) on Facebook users for the year 2013 shows that the ages range from 13-65 years old. The study found that people in the age group of 18-24 years use Facebook the most, which can be calculated as 35 percent of all users. If generational cohorts criteria are applied with this age group, it can be seen that the largest quantity of Facebook users are from Generation Z and Y. Gen Z contains people born in the years 1994-2011; they grew up with modern technology and are thus sometimes called Generation I, the Internet Generation, Generation Text, Generation @, or Digital Native. Gen Y or Why Generation contains people born in the years 1980-1990; they are early working age people who are familiar with new technology and able to use modern devices skillfully (Samkoses, 2011).
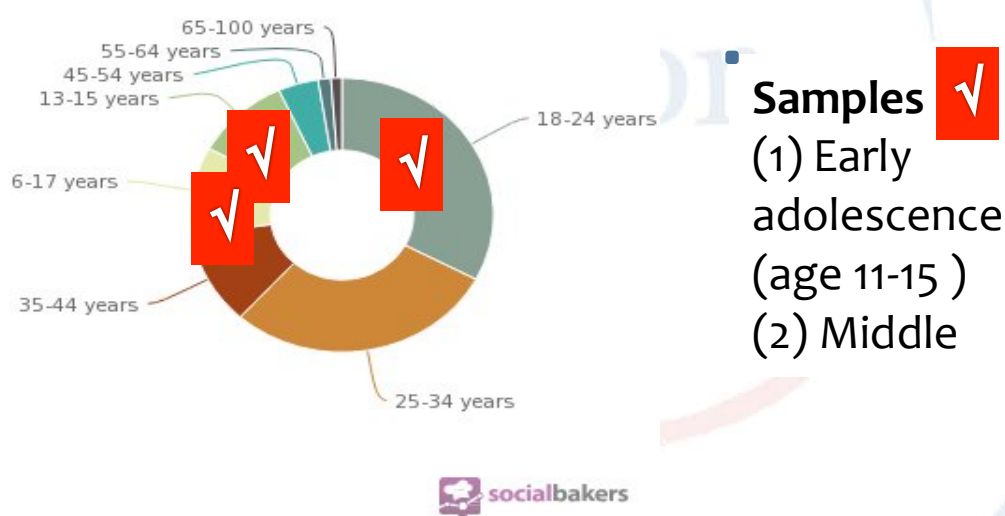

Figure 1: Thailand Facebook Statistics

Source: http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/thailand

The book "eYouth Balancing Between Opportunities and Risks" mentioned that Social Networking Sites (SNS) have become the major space that teenagers use to contact each other, as both receivers (downloading data) and senders (uploading data). Not only do they share their basic interests among their peers, they also use the space to create content that reflects their identity through the online public sphere. The

reason teenagers choose online communication is that it is easy to access. It can also be a channel to contact people around the world. This method of communication makes teenagers feel they have power; therefore, many of them decide to express themselves with text messages, photographs, video clips, or presenting their point of view and interests in online social networks in order to establish their identity, which they expect to be accepted by others (Walrave, 2012, pp.80-85).

This information moved the researcher to question how Thai adolescents use Facebook, especially as a public sphere.
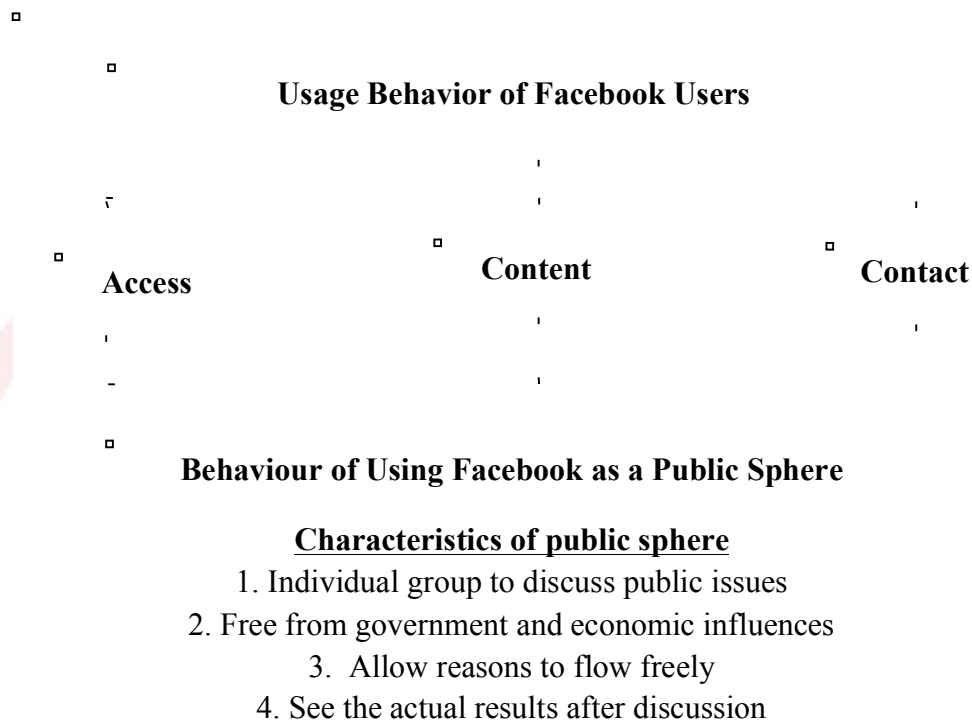
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas envisioned a place where community members could collectively form public opinions in an environment removed from the government or economy. Moreover, he defined this public sphere as a place that mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself through public opinion in accordance with the principle of the public sphere – the principle of public information that has made possible the democratic control of state activities. In addition, Habermas's public sphere model specifically focuses on psychical space and political topics (Habermas, 1974, pp.49-55).

Nowadays, social networking sites have expanded the realm of the public sphere from a physical sphere to a visual sphere. Public issues do not only include political topics; other topics such as social topics and cultural topics have also assumed prominence (Keawthep, 2008).

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Usage Behavior of Facebook Users

Access   **Content**   **Contact**

Behaviour of Using Facebook as a Public Sphere

Characteristics of public sphere
1. Individual group to discuss public issues
2. Free from government and economic influences
3. Allow reasons to flow freely
4. See the actual results after discussion

Methodology

This research collected data from informal interviews with 65 Facebook users, in-depth interviews and non-participant observations of a sample group of 15 persons, and document analysis. The researcher used the data to answer the research questions employing the analytical methods shown in table 2

Table 2: Research Questions Theories Concepts and Methodologies

Research Questions	Theories and Concepts	Technical Approach
(1) how teenagers communicate through online social networks such as Facebook	(1) New Media (2) Computer Mediated Communication (3) Social Media (4) Adolescence	(1) Informal Interviews with 65 Facebook users (2) Documentary Analysis
(2) how teenagers communicate through online social networks such as Facebook as a public sphere.	(1) New Media (2) Computer Mediated Communication (3) Social Media (4) Adolescence (5) Public Sphere	(1) In-depth interviews with 15 Facebook users (2) Non-participant Observation (3) Documentary Analysis

Findings

Facebook usage behavior of Thai teenagers

The results from the study on the usage behavior of Facebook users in the representative sample group has shown that they are heavy users in terms of both frequency and duration, which means that the majority of teenagers in the representative sample of all age groups log onto Facebook everyday for more than one hour per time and they mostly use it between 6.01 pm. – 00.00 am.

However, it is interesting to note that when the researcher compared the generational cohorts with the ages of the members of the sample groups, it included Generation Y (17-25 years old) and Generation Z (11-16 years old). The outstanding media in generation Y is electronic media such as radio and television, which is the first step of the internet. However, the outstanding media of Generation Z is the internet. Therefore, when considering the data from the sample, the researcher found that both

generations are able to use new media such as the internet: however, Generation Y uses other media apart from the internet, while Generation Z mainly uses the internet.

The researcher also discovered that the sample group performs many tasks at the same time since teenagers have been raised with the new communication technology that allows them to receive information through many media channels. Thus, the line between personal and business issues and leisure time and working time has become blurred. Many respondents use Facebook to discuss homework with their friends while chatting and posting songs or private pictures. Not only is the line between working time and personal time becoming unclear, the line between the usage area of the public sphere and the personal sphere of the representative sample is also vague. In other words, Facebook is an online social network where users can set their own private or public policy. According to the study, users broadcast their private issues such as daily routines or love in the public sphere, i.e., posting on message boards and allowing more than one person to see it. On the other hand, some discuss public issues such as politics via the chat box, which is the private sphere where users can choose or specify the recipients. The results from the non-participant observations and in-depth interviews with 15 members of the sample group show that they more often communicate by posting personal issues on message boards, which is considered a public sphere, than public issues.

Therefore, the researcher can summarize the usage behavior in the Facebook space of the sample group as follows:

(1)   Rapprochement

In reality, people are connected by many kinds of relationships, both genetic relationships (father, mother, child and relatives) and social relationships (employer and employee or friend); however, in Facebook, people are linked with only one relationship called "friend". Friendships in Facebook can be made, expanded, and ended easily.

It is interesting that some in the sample group had hundreds of friends in their network but they choose to communicate with only a few people. This can be explained by the notion that acceptance is what teenagers desire, and the number of friends shown in the friend list reflects social acceptance concretely. Therefore, users

may have a large quantity of friends and not focus on the quality of friends. It can be concluded that friendship in Facebook will not be long lasting without support from relationships in reality. Moreover, the system itself is conducive to breaking off relations easily. Users can always click to cancel friendships or "unfriend" people in the system. Furthermore, Facebook allows users to create fictitious relations; the system offers an opportunity for users to specify relationships with someone in particular and display to the public or people in their network such as being in relationship or a relative with someone. To specify the relations, both users must click confirm before the status will be displayed. The interesting aspect about this relationship is that sometimes it is unreal. For instance, a female in late adolescence specified that she is engaged in her profile, but in reality, she is not; she is just dating.

(2)   Source of Entertainment

There are many applications in Facebook which users can use to entertain themselves including chat boxes, games, and picture or video uploads; these allow users to be both the sender and recipient. The study also found that the most entertaining aspect of Facebook for the sample group is its function as a center of communication between friends.

(3)   Source of Public Information

Facebook contains a wide range of information, i.e., private information, which comes from text postings by one user, and public information, in the form of fanpages. The system divides data into categories so users can click the button "like" in order to check on updated news occasionally, or they can click "like" and click "subscribe" to follow the movement of fanpages they are interested in. These are the main advantages of the public sphere in Facebook compared to the public sphere in the real world. In terms of physical space, the public sphere in Facebook is convenient, rapid, and easy to access; there are no limitations in terms of time and space and the information is more various than the public sphere in the real world. People just sit in front of their computers or mobile phones, from which they can frequently get involved or receive public information from the various sources of information around the world.

(4)   Communication Channel for Sensitive Topics

From the non-participant observations together with the in-depth interviews, the researcher found that the members of the representative sample used Facebook as a communication channel for sensitive topics in two ways:

(4.1)   Private Issue

The 15 members of the sample group in early, middle, and late adolescence used Facebook as a space to reveal their emotions and feelings or their dislike of people who have higher status in the real world such as teachers or parents. This is because they cannot express their opinion directly in reality. For instance, a male aged 16 showed his resentment and questioned the teaching and learning methods as well as the homework assignments of his teachers.

In addition, member of the sample, especially those in early and middle adolescence, use Facebook as a space to reveal their attraction to the opposite gender since they cannot express this in reality due to the Thai cultural framework. Often they do not dare to express their attraction to a person directly as it is very sensitive; for example, a 14-year-old female described her one-sided love of a friend of the opposite gender.

(4.2)   Public Issues

According to the data gathered from the representative sample group, some topics that are forbidden in the real world are discussed as public issues on Facebook. Based on the interviews and non-participant observations, 2 of 15 in the representative sample post   on their status as a means to criticize or satirize the following political issues that cannot   be   spoken   of   or communicated about directly in the real world or by the mainstream media.

(4.2.1) Criticizing the management of the Governor of Bangkok

(4.2.2) Criticizing the content of the censure debate

(4.2.3) Criticizing political rallies

(4.2.4) Discussing attitudes towards President Obama's visits to Thailand and Burma.

(5)   Social Monitoring, Social Criticizing, and Complaint Center

According to the content that appears on the Facebook page of the members of the representative sample and the pages that they join, the study found that a female aged 24 holding a bachelor's degree and working as a radio program creative uses Facebook as a channel to give early warning information, and to criticize news or events that take place in society. For example, she updates her status to criticize the performance of politicians, policies of the government, and to complain about the impolite and dangerous manner in which public vehicles, such as buses or ambulances, are driven.

(6)   Reflection of the True Identity of Each Individual

According to the non-participant observations together with the interviews, the study showed that the majority in the representative sample (9 people out of 15 people) use Facebook to reflect their real identity via applications such as their profile, status on their message board, photo uploading, checking in where they are, and clicking like for fanpages. These Facebook functions allow them to express themselves to the public easily.

The information from the pages of the representative sample group showed that most of them use real photos and names to identify themselves to others. Moreover, some use the space in the profile section to specify their attitudes including mottos or their political point of view.

(7)   Creating what users want to be and want others to know

(7.1)   Creating what users want to be

According to the non-participant observations together with the interviews, the study found that six members of the representative sample group out of 15 had created a new identity in the profile section that did not match with reality and they do not care whether other people believe that information. Their objective is only to communicate or express what they want to be since, in reality, when filling in forms such as birth certificates, medical records, educational records, etc., people are required to give true details. However, Facebook allows teenagers to create information that will show the exact identity they desire in regard to their past, present, and future. The details of the information that the members of the representative sample changed to create new identities include:

"Name" – Some decided not to use their real names in the profile section as, in reality, nobody can choose their names, which, despite the fact that it reflects the basic identity of humans, are chosen by parents, relatives, monks, or even fortune tellers. After growing up and gaining more life experience, some in the sample did not want to be what others want them to; on the contrary, they want others to accept their own choice of identity.

According to the non-participant observations together with the in-depth interviews, the researcher discovered that some members of the representative sample use their real names and surnames when they first sign up, and subsequently change them to other names. For instance, Puifai (alias), a 20-year-old female states her Facebook name as Ayumi Nimana. Benjaporn Kumsupa, an 18-year-old female, chose Sung Eunra (Eunhae) as her Facebook name.

"Self-Explanation" – In the Facebook profile section, users can write a self-description. According to the research, some in the representative sample invent information about themselves in their status description. For example, Thidarat Sakeaw, 15 years old, is a student of Satri Sirikes School in the real world, but on Facebook, she identifies herself as a magic teacher of Hogwarts School.

"Address" – In reality, Bonus, a 17-year-old female, is originally from Surin, Thailand. On Facebook, she is in Seoul, Korea. Anongnat Sutapan, a 13-year-old, is from Srisaket, Thailand, but on Facebook, she specifies that she is in Seola Beach, Washington.

"Education" - Thanetpol Pramote uses Facebook to create the educational background he wants to have in the future. In other words, he is 16 years old and he is studying in a secondary school in Chonburi province, but for his education he writes on Facebook that he studies electrical engineering in a university because he dreams that he will study in this faculty in the future.

(7.2)   Creating an identity users want other to recognize

The widely held notion about the needs of adolescents is that teenagers need friendship, notoriety, and acceptance from friends and society. Facebook spaces can fulfill these needs as its functions allow users to communicate with a lot of people

and they can   concretely see the reactions and interest from others towards the content they post from the amount of comments or likes. These reactions make teenagers feel that they are significant and accepted.

According to the study, many users tend to choose and reuse similar information or patterns to get interest from others; for example, using programs to edit pictures before uploading to make them look brighter or selecting photos with similar postures that people previously complimented. They also choose photos about their daily life that others accept, such as uploading pictures of food that they do not eat as regular meals.

Some in the representative sample group adjust their level of language to be more polite when they communicate in the space when more than one friend in the system is able to see, such as friends, friend of friends, and public settings including communication in fanpage groups. This adjustment of the language level uses the same criteria as in the real world, which means that when communicating with people they are not familiar with, with the public, or with someone superior, the sender will use a communication method suitable to the recipient. Even though everyone on Facebook is linked together under the status of "friend", people have different levels of relationships in reality. Some users add teachers, or elder relatives as their friends. Also, one characteristic of this form of media is that recipients cannot see non-verbal communication or hear the tone of voice, which affects interpretation. Therefore, some decide to adjust the language they use in updating their   status   or expressing their opinions on message boards in instances where more than one user is allowed to see.

Facebook and the Reflection and Creation of Teenager's Identity

The results indicate that Thai teenagers are highly interested in forming their identity or self via Facebook as, in the real world, their identity is influenced by the dominant culture; in contrast, on Facebook, teenagers are a part of their own subculture and are able to freely create and customize their unique identity.

Early adolescents in the representative sample aged 11-15 years and middle adolescents aged 16-18 years are more likely to evidence collective identity formation than the late adolescence group aged 19-25 years. It can be seen from the results that

the early and middle adolescence groups have the most fanpage users and participate in a regular manner, which constitutes reading information, looking at photos, and commenting on an ongoing basis. Moreover, the results of the study regarding fanpage selection show that the members of the sample group are interested in and join the fanpages of good-looking people. This is because teenagers are interested in the opposite sex. It is noticeable that a person who is liked, no matter if he/she is an artist, an actor, an athlete, or an ordinary person, is usually a member of the opposite sex with a good personality or someone with a unique personality that can draw attention from the public. This is consistent with the psychological needs of adolescents aged 10-12 years and 13-18 years, who are interested in gatherings, the opposite sex, and seeking ideal role models (Konglarb, 2008).

The late adolescents in the sample aged 19-25 years have more developed individual identity formation than the early and middle adolescence group. The results show that they use profile pages to create their identity via status updates and photos of their preferred activities such as photos of their favorite books. They use fanpages to follow the news as irregular followers, which means that they read the information or look at pictures occasionally. The behavior of the late adolescents in the representative sample is different from the early and middle adolescents because this age group has better analytical skills and a clearer identity. Therefore, they usually present who they really are on Facebook.

Discussion: Thai Teenagers and the Usage of Facebook as a Public Sphere

When considering the usage of Facebook space by members of the representative sample, an extension of the public issue from the mainstream politics is seen, which is the main public issue that Harbermas has framed in regard to daily political and social issues. These public issues differ from the original definition.

The behavior of using Facebook on a daily basis by the representative sample does not move to the absolute public sphere, which means that they use Facebook to raise public issues that can lead to opinion exchange. However, the opinions flowing in the system are not supported with reasons or grounded in facts; they are mostly parody or

satire, which is ineffective in practical terms as the purpose of this research was to study the use of Facebook on a daily basis. However, the researcher noticed signs of movement to a higher level of involvement compared to earlier studies of new media in a Thai context; for example, in the research of Penpan Rawichotikul(2011), an analysis of the discourse on the Internet bulletin board of the website called Pantip; meanwhile, the study of Rattanavalee Kaittiniyomsak(2009) about on the public sphere of computer-mediated communication: a case study of www.pantip.com and www.sanook.com, found that the public sphere today is not used to express individual opinions but instead to show the various opinions of each group of people in society. Users are not concerned about the true content; they just browse for entertainment.

From the additional survey of the Facebook behavior of Thai teenagers, the results show that Facebook is used as a medium of the social movement in many groups, such as TU cute dog, which is a fanpage of Thammasat University students who created a group to take care of the dogs on campus. They place donation boxes around campus and ask for donations through Facebook to be used to spay and neuter dogs. Also, during a crisis situation such as a flood or an unusual political situation, we can see that some Thai teenagers use Facebook as a forum to exchange ideas and help society in practical ways. Therefore, future research about Facebook behavior in regard to the social integration of teenagers, especially in regard to fanpages, will be interesting to undertake.

In conclusion, being considered a public sphere not only depends on the physical space, but also on the users as mentioned by Mike Westling(2007) in the summary of the article, "Expanding the Public Sphere: The Impact of Facebook on Political Communication". The researcher stated that there is a positive direction of communicating political issues via Facebook, which is different from television, newspaper, or websites that restrict access to information. While these media do not allow users to participate, Facebook enables users to select message or content to receive, including creating groups and inviting others to join. This fact is mentioned by Adam Collins (Westling, 2007), who stated that the value of Facebook depends on the power of users, who can create and react to public issues from their own perspective. If there is encouragement and support of political issue communication

on Facebook, in the future it can become the center of public issue discussion as Habermas expects to happen.

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