

Media and Social Influences on the Use of Social Networking Sites in Thailand

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Abstract

With the capabilities to serve as mass and interpersonal communication simultaneously, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter have changed from a newly adopted communication tool to a widely accepted one in only a past few years. The rapid growth of SNSs becomes a global phenomenon in which scholars have attempted to understand it as promptly as the technology turns to one of the most powerful medium influencing people's daily lives.

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More and more people have used SNSs for social and political involvement. In Thailand, the continuing political crises influence SNS usage as a channel for people to voice opinion, gain involvement, and exercise power and right for political purposes. In 2010, about 5,000 people from the “no color” Facebook community gathered in public to support Thai government, while approximately 4,000 Facebook users volunteered to clean up Bangkok areas affected by the two-month red shirt demonstration (Bunnag & Charoenpo, 2010; Treerutkuarkul, 2010). Then, the next question to be raised is “how people are influenced by others and situations in their society to use SNSs.”

Therefore, the major purpose of this study is to explain how external factors such as social concerns, political situations, media, and significant others influence SNS usage among people. Participants ($N = 20$) were Internet users, with age range from 18 to 43 years old, participated in focus-group interviews. Across all age groups, significant others influenced participants to use SNSs the most, while certain media channels affected their use at some degree. However, political and social situations influenced SNS use differently among the four groups. Economic situations did not affect their SNS use at all. Other factors influencing SNS use were such as privacy concern, games, and professional image.

Keywords : Social networking sites, SNS, Theory of Reasoned Action, Social influences, Social media, Qualitative, Thailand

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are defined as online communities that allow members to construct and broadcast their profile information, and interact with other users such as sharing photos, sending public and personal messages, and playing games (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The advent of SNSs has facilitated online communities to maintain pre-existing social connections and make new online friends (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). With the capabilities to serve as mass and interpersonal communication simultaneously, social networking sites have changed from a newly adopted communication tool to a widely accepted one in less than a decade. In February 2012, Facebook, one of the well-known social media, publicly announced to the world for its status on stock exchange with 845 million users worldwide, becoming the biggest and fastest growing social networking site in the world after its service started in February 2004 (Foley, 2012). Twitter, started in March 2006, celebrated its fifth birthday with about 200 million users in March 2011 (Shiels, 2011). Also, about 61% of American Internet users use social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter (Smith, 2011). In Thailand, about 28% of the population are Internet users, and almost 70% of them have participated in social networking sites (National Electronics Computer Technology Center, 2008, 2010a). Recently, using social networking sites was ranked as the second most popular activity on mobile Internet among Thai users (National Electronics Computer Technology Center, 2010b).

The rapid growth of social networking sites becomes a global phenomenon in which scholars have attempted to understand it as promptly as the

technology turns to one of the most powerful medium influencing people's daily lives. Apparently, the empirical investigation on why people widely use SNSs seems to move beyond internal drives and individual differences. People are internally motivated to use SNSs for relationship maintenance and entertainment (Dumrongpaisiri & Pornsakulvanich, 2010). It is clear that people have different motives for using SNSs, and these motives influence the use of SNSs differently (see Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). However, how they are externally motivated to use SNSs needs further explanation.

More and more people have used SNSs for social and political involvement. Recently, about 22% of American Internet users use SNSs to engage in political campaign (Smith, 2011). Similarly, the continuing political crises in Thailand influence SNS use as a channel for people to voice opinion, gain involvement, and exercise power and right for political purposes. In 2010, about 5,000 people from the "no color" Facebook community gathered in public to support Thai government, while approximately 4,000 Facebook users volunteered to clean up Bangkok areas affected by the two-month red shirt demonstration (Bunnag & Charoenpo, 2010; Treerutkuarkul, 2010). Then, the next question to be raised is "how people are influenced by others and situations in their society to use SNSs."

Therefore, this paper is aimed to explain the SNS use with an alternative perspective through the "outside-in" lens that focus on external influences instead of internal drives. The literature with the need-motive-behavior perspective such as the Uses and Gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 2002) explains that media behavior

is driven by individual needs leading to motives to perform a certain behavior. Differently, Theory of Reasoned Action guides that other people's attitudes influence media behavior. Thus, based on the Theory of Reasoned Action as the alternative view, this study suggests that people are socially influenced to use SNSs. The main purpose of this research project is to explain how external factors such as social concerns, political situations, media, and significant others influence SNS use among people. The theoretical framework and related literature on social influences on media behavior are reviewed in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) has been widely used to explain people's intention to adopt and use the new media such as Internet, instant messaging, and mobile phone (e.g., Davis, 1989; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Muk, 2007; Yaubin et al., 2009). TRA suggests that people's behavioral intention is the determinant of their behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). People make decision to perform or not to perform a particular behavior based on two factors: attitude toward the behavior and subjective norm. Attitude toward the behavior is defined as a person's positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior. Subjective norm is defined as others' opinions whether a person should or should not perform a behavior.

As guided by TRA, this study proposes that people are socially influenced at a varying degree by significant others and society to use SNSs. What others perceive their SNS use would affect how they use SNSs. Literature pertaining to social influences on SNS use are reviewed and discussed in following section.

Social Factors as External Influences on SNS Use

Several studies also support that social factors influence how people use new media technologies. Social influence was an important determinant of intention to use the new system in organizations (Mathisen, 1991; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Friends and loved ones play a crucial role to encourage users to participate in an online social community website. They usually send an online invitation letter and/or discuss blogging activities offline (Ellison et al., 2007; Madden & Fox, 2006; Walther et al., 2008). Although Dumrongsiri and Pornsakulvanich (2009) reported social influence as one of the SNS motives, it reflected only one dimension – peer pressure. Other factors such as significant others, norms, and media may influence how people use SNSs.

Pelling and White (2009) indicated that subjective norm was a significant predictor of high frequency of SNS use. Although, the subjective norm was defined as “people who are important to me” (Pelling & White, 2009, p. 757), the results are limited to explain who are those significant others. The current study aims to elaborate and specify the term significant others based on a qualitative approach.

Later, Dumrongsiri and Pornsakulvanich (2010) examined both motives as internal drives and external influences affecting SNS use among college students. The results revealed six motives for using SNSs: peer pressure, entertainment, socializing, information sharing, relationship maintenance, and passing time. Furthermore, a four-factor solution was generated as external influences on SNS use: (a) media, (b) word of mouth, (c) country situation,

and (d) significant others. Entertainment and significant others were significant predictors of SNS use. However, the findings represent only college students' SNS behavior. Other groups of SNS users may be influenced differently by these external factors. The current study will further explore this speculation and generalize the external influences to various groups of people.

Overall, the prior studies provide evidence that people tend to be influenced externally to use the new communication technology social networking sites. The external influences include factors in the society that affect people's perception and behavior of the social networking sites. These factors are such as media contents, significant others and admired persons, social events, political situations, and economy.

This study used a qualitative approach to answer one research question:

RQ1: What are the external factors that influence SNS use?

Method

Sampling and Procedure

Participants were Internet users who had used social networking sites. The purposive and snowball samplings were used to recruit participants with various age groups. Age differences influence how people adopt and use new innovations (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985; Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009; Rogers, 1983). Thus, age was used as a criterion to classify technology users. Also, based on a national survey by National Electronics Computer Technology Center (2008) that classified the Internet users in Thailand into four age ranges: (a) 15-19

years old, (b) 20-29 years old, (c) 30-39 years old, and (d) 40 years old and above. Four focus-group interviews were conducted to represent the four groups of the Internet users in Thailand accordingly.

Participants ($N = 20$) who joined the four focus groups were 10 males and 10 females, with age ranged from 18 to 43 years old. They were students ($n = 9$; 45.0%), employees working in private sector ($n = 6$; 30.0%), government/state enterprise officers ($n = 1$; 5.0%), and business owners ($n = 4$; 20.0%). Participants graduated at high school level (45%), Bachelor's degree (25%), and Master's degree (30%).

Two moderators were trained about one month before the interview arrangements. They were provided with instructions, guidelines for the focus group interviews, and interview schedule. The training session prepared the moderators for the questions to be asked as listed in the interview schedule, the approach to narrow down the responses and probe for more information, and the roles of the moderators before and during the interview.

Then, in January 2011, the one-hour interview was scheduled and conducted separately for each group. The interviews were conducted at the university's faculty lounges, which were usually used for class preparation and then limited distractions. Before the interview was started, an informed consent was distributed to the participants to inform about the purpose of the research project, to ensure confidentiality of their responses, and to notify that the interview was voice recoded. Also, the contact information of the research team was provided for further questions and a summary of the findings, if needed. After the interview, the moderators expressed thanks to the participants with a small gift to each of them.

Structured Interview Questions

According to Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000), structured interview ensures consistency when the interview is conducted with different groups of respondents and by different interviewers. This study used structured interviews and directive questions by constructing the interview schedule in which a predetermined series of questions were listed for the moderators to follow the format consistently. Interview schedule is an appropriate instrument for focus groups to develop a structured approach for interviewers who conduct the session in separate locations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The interview schedule consisted of the questions divided into six parts: (a) general questions about the SNSs used often, frequency of use, and the reasons for using SNSs; (b) media contents about SNSs and their influences on SNS use (i.e., television, radio, print, and out-of-home); (c) significant others who influenced the SNS use (i.e., loved ones and admired persons); (d) word-of-mouth about SNSs and its influences; (e) social, political, and economic situations and their influences on the SNS use, and (f) other factors that influenced participants to use SNSs more or less. All questions were open-ended to allow the participants to respond freely in their own words.

Data Transcription

The interview data were transcribed and recorded in the structured format. The data were summarized by the sequence of the questions for each of the six parts. Then, two coders analyzed the transcribed data and discussed for agreement on the main contents and categories emerged from the interview data.

Results

The qualitative analysis yielded answers to the research question asking “What are external factors that influence SNS use?” Among the four groups, participants shared similarities when using SNSs daily, but differed in how media and society influenced their use (see Table 1). Table 1 presents a summary of participants’ experience in SNS use. Their initial responses were elaborated with the probe for more explanations and examples, which were described in details in the next section.

Overall, across the groups, the most frequently visited social networking site was Facebook, followed by Twitter and YouTube. Few participants also reported their use of other SNSs such as Multiply, Flickr, and Foursquare. Also, in all groups, participants used SNSs everyday, varying from one to seven hours daily. Nevertheless, they had different years of experience in using SNSs. Participants with age below 40 had used SNSs over four years, whereas those whose age of 40 and above indicated their experience of three years or less for SNS use (see Table 1).

Media and society influenced participants’ use of SNSs differently by group. Political situations affected most of participants in all age groups, especially for those with age of 30 and above (see Table 1). Social situations did not influence SNS use for those in the younger age of 15 to 19, but slightly affected the use of SNS in the age groups of 20 and above. Economic situations did not affect participants’ use of SNSs at all. However, across all groups, significant others seemed to influence participants to use SNSs the most. The findings from Table 1 were expanded in the following section.

Motives of SNS Use

The responses to the question why participants used SNSs were grouped into three categories of SNS motives: (a) relationship maintenance, (b) information sharing, and (c) entertainment. Participants in all groups reported their reasons to use SNSs for maintaining relationships and sharing information. However, entertainment was not the motive of using SNSs for participants in the group age of 40 and above.

Relationship maintenance reflected the reasons to preserve existing ties with others such as high-school, long-distant, and old friends. A 21-year old participant said, “after I got email addresses, I search for their names and ask them to add me in the list.” Another 38-year old business owner reported the reason to use Facebook “to contact school friends and chat.” Similarly, others also said that they used SNSs “to check friends’ birthdates and greet them” and “to chat with friends and see where they plan to meet.”

Information sharing reflected the reasons for using SNSs to exchange and update information about others such as friends and favorite persons. The interview responses from the 15-to-19-year-old group were “to see others’ posted stories,” “to see school friends’ pictures and comments,” and “to see what my favorite star is doing.” A 26-year-old employee in private sector said, “I use Facebook to update what I’m doing and see what’s going on with friends.” Similar to those in the 30-to-39-year-old group, they reported their reasons “to post my pictures, update my status, see others’ pictures, and share stories,” “to vent my feelings for others to comment.” Another 43-year-old Facebook user, a private sector employee, indicated that she used the SNS because “I want to know about others.

Table 1 Summary of SNS Use for the Four Focus Groups

Question	Majority Reported by Age Group			
	15-19	20-29	30-39	40 & Above
SNS Use:				
Which SNSs do you often?	Facebook Hi5	Facebook YouTube	Facebook Twitter	Facebook Twitter YouTube
How often do you use SNSs?		1 hour - 7 hours everyday		
How long have you used SNSs?	4-6 years	6-7 years	4-5 years	1-3 years
Media Influences:				
Have you heard/seen people talk about SNSs on television?	All said yes.	All said yes.	All said yes.	80% yes 20% no
Have you heard people talk about SNSs on radio?	60% yes 40% no	40% yes 60% no	40% yes 60% no	60% yes 40% no
Have you seen information about SNSs in printing media?	40% yes 60% no	All said yes.	40% yes 60% no	60% yes 40% no
Have you seen information about SNSs in out-of-home media?	20% yes 80% no	All said no.	All said no.	20% yes 80% no
From what you have heard/seen information about SNSs, does it influence you to use them more or less?	60% yes 40% no	80% yes 20% no	20% yes 80% no	20% yes 80% no
Social Influences:				
Do you think significant others (e.g., family, friends, and favorite persons) influence you to use SNSs more or less?	All said yes.	All said yes.	80% yes 20% no	All said yes.
When you heard people talk about SNSs, does it encourage you to use them more or less?	All said yes.	80% yes 20% no	All said yes.	80% yes 20% no
When you heard people talk about SNSs, does it make you feel in trend?	20% yes 80% no	60% yes 40% no	60% yes 40% no	20% yes 80% no
Do political situations encourage you to use SNSs more or less?	60% yes 40% no	40% yes 60% no	All said yes.	80% yes 20% no
Do social situations (e.g., flood donations, <i>Facebook</i> crime) encourage you to use SNSs more or less?	All said no.	40% yes 60% no	20% yes 80% no	20% yes 80% no
Do economic situations (e.g., stock market, gold price) encourage you to use SNSs more or less?	All said no.	All said no.	All said no.	20% yes 80% no

Note: Each focus group had five participants.

Some friends post what they're doing after they wake up. I read what my friends have posted, but I rarely post."

A 43-year-old male, a government officer, used multiple SNSs "to post my delicious dishes and my pictures from trips, to follow the columnist 'Suttichai Yun' in Twitter. This helps me to save money and to get news at the same time. Also, I use Multiply to share my photos and get others' comments to improve my works."

Also, a female business owner at the age of 40s used YouTube, Facebook, and Flickr and accepted that "I'm the queen post, really like to post information about foods, music, and motto. I don't often read others' posted messages, except they're favorite friends. Sometimes I'm a DJ to play songs for my friends. There're 30 listeners at the most. The least is me as a DJ, the only one listener."

The last motive category was entertainment that reflected the reasons for using SNSs to have fun and relax. Several participants revealed their reasons falling into this category. A 19-year-old student and a 31-year-old private sector employee gave the same reason to use Facebook and Twitter for entertainment when updating others' stories. Another participant said, "I use Facebook when I have free time." None from the 40-and-above group mentioned about using SNSs for entertainment at all. Each is more purposive and specific in their use such as to contact particular persons and to post certain messages.

Media Contents and Influences on SNS Use

Television. Most participants had seen information about SNSs on television after the

news programs, reality shows, and variety programs. Based on their responses, the television contents about SNSs were classified in two themes: (a) promotional information of the programs, products, or persons; and (b) elaborated issues.

Examples of the promotional information were quoted. A student said, "I've seen it after the news program on channel three to ask for suggestions in Facebook." Another student stated, "I've seen some stars promoting themselves, asking people to update about those stars in their Facebook." The response from a business owner was "I've seen the morning program telling people to watch the previous show in YouTube." A private-sector employee agreed that he had seen information about Facebook, "some TV programs said people can follow the programs via Facebook to create a fan club."

The elaborated issues were stories or what people had talked about on the SNSs and then were elaborated or presented by the mainstream media on television. The responses were such as "I've seen the news about the fan club of the football player strongly commented the coach on Twitter," "I saw the TV news that the superstars had their unintentional pictures posted on the Facebook," "I heard the news talking about the talk-of-the-town car accident or some stars fight each other via Facebook." A business owner said, "I've seen the TV news about Facebook, both good and bad ways. The good ones were when people on Facebook gathered together to clean up the victory monument area or to be against something. The bad ones were about deception or crime." Another participant gave an interesting example about business. She said, "I've heard the TV news talking about a man who promotes his

cake delivery on Facebook and Twitter. This is a successful business using social network.”

Radio. Those who had never heard the information about SNSs on radio gave the reason that they normally did not listen to the radio or they did not pay attention to the message. Similar to the SNS information on television, the responses from participants who had heard about SNSs on radio were about (a) promotional information and activities and (b) elaborated issues. One said about promotional activities, “I’ve heard about it on Virgin Hit radio program asking people to post on Facebook for a prize,” and another student’s quote was, “I heard DJ on Cool 98.5 station asking people to use it for sweepstake.” A college student said, “I heard the spot about Facebook of that radio station, and my friend checked it out.”

Elaborated issues were more about news, especially about star gossips. A male employee of a private sector gave the example that “I heard some in the form of news from Facebook or Twitter. For example, the 94 EFM station talked about two stars having a fight because of the post on Facebook.” Another example was “I heard the 96.5 and 106.5 stations mentioned about Facebook during the news talk.”

Print and Out-of-Home. Most participants who had never seen information about SNSs in printing accepted that they did not read magazines and other printing media, especially those in the younger generation of 15-19 years old. The SNS information that participants had seen were in magazines rather than in newspaper. The contents about SNSs in printing media were classified as (a) promotional information, (b) elaborated issues, and (c) the source for additional information about products or persons.

The responses from several students were “I saw it in the magazine, it was about the story to be continued in Facebook,” “I saw it in some printing about the games in Facebook,” and “I saw advertisement in magazines about people can see the products in Facebook, but I’ve never seen information about SNSs in newspaper.” A 26-year-old employee responded that “I’ve seen magazine advertisement and also crime news in newspaper. It was about the person was followed because of the message posted on Facebook.” Another employee in age 30s said, “Most of what I’ve seen are QR codes to follow the link for more information in Facebook. I think this saves the expense and updates the information more easily. Most of them are in magazines.” Another response was “I read in the column about self-promotion for superstars asking people to click Like on fan page.”

The majority of the participants had never seen information about SNSs in out-of-home media. Few participants had seen the SNS information on billboard, and this information served as an additional source for more details about products or persons. Some of the responses were “I saw tiny fonts, not sure if they were website or SNS,” “I used to see Facebook address on billboard,” and “I’ve seen billboard advertisement about Nokia/Samsung devices to be used with Facebook.” However, the messages about SNSs on billboard are not effective. Most people do not observe the information.

Although participants had seen or heard about information related to SNSs in similar ways, they were influenced to use them more or less differently. Television is a common medium reached by majority of people to be informed about SNSs, whereas radio and printing are selective media for certain groups of people.

Interestingly, the media contents have different effects on SNS use among the four groups. Those who indicated what they had seen or heard in the media about SNSs influenced their use were in the group age 20-29 years old. Most of the participants in this group accepted that they used SNSs much more when the mainstream media elaborated the issues or when they wanted to know more about their favorite stars. "If it's the story from the media and what I'm interested in, it makes me really want to check it out to get update information," the response from a private-sector employee. Two participants similarly stated if they knew that their favorite stars had Facebook, they wanted to use it more to follow them.

Participants in the age between 15-19 years old revealed that the media contents moderately influenced them to use SNSs more, especially for promotion and convenience. The responses from different participants were, "It affects a bit when it's about promotion such as sweepstake because it is convenient and fast. If it's done in a letter, I think it's more complicated than the post in Facebook," "It has some influences when I want my comment or feedback heard in the media. Facebook is convenient and fast, letter is slow," "It makes me use SNSs more when the radio program asks people to request popular songs in Facebook.

Most of the participants who aged 30s and above expressed that media contents about SNSs had small impact on their use, depending on whether those contents were their interest at the time. One said, "The media don't affect me to use Facebook more or less. All I have are some more friends who share similar interest. But for Twitter, I use it to get update news, to follow the columnist 'Suttichai,' to check traffic. After that, my use is slow down."

Other responses were "It doesn't affect me at all. If I really want to buy the product, I'll link to its website directly and won't get news from SNS because the information isn't accurate," and "It's totally not related to my use because I have a certain purpose when I use it."

Social Influences on SNS Use

Significant others and word of mouth. Thus far, the findings show that the contents presented in the media tend to affect how people use SNSs differently. The next questions asked the participants whether significant others, word-of-mouth, and feeling to be in trend encouraged them to use SNSs more. In this study, across all groups, the majority of participants agreed that their loved ones, family members, and friends influenced them to use SNSs, both more and less. However, favorite stars or singers had small effects on their use.

Many of the participants stated that they used SNSs because friends had used and talked about the sites. The responses from some participants were quoted "When many friends talked about their post in Facebook, I really wanted to keep updated on it. For favorite stars, I'd never thought of going to their Facebook," "I play around it because more and more friends use it, also to keep in touch with old friends," "At first, I used Hi5, then my friends asked me to use Facebook, so I use it more to keep up with them." Some used SNSs to maintain a long-distant relationship, "I use it to talk with family members living abroad."

Differently, several participants used SNSs less because of their significant others' reaction. A male college student said that he stopped using Facebook for a year because "Facebook is public space. Some personal matters became a problem when others

knew about it. Sometimes I didn't want certain people to know this, so I stopped using it." Similarly, a female college student expressed that "my aunt wants to add me in Facebook, but I don't want to accept her because I'll use it less." Another quote was "I use it more to follow many friends, but my wife begins to get upset about it. So, I have to use it less."

For the most part, participant did not feel that their SNS use made them feel in trend. Some expressed that they did not pay attention to follow the trend, they used SNSs only for things that were their interest, or they perceived SNSs as common media that most people used them generally. Those who accepted that SNSs made them feel in trend seem to search for inclusion and belonging. They said "Yes, I don't want to be left out for things that most people talk about," "Of course, it makes me feel updated with things and be able to add on the conversation."

Overall, significant others, especially close ties, and words spread around among them produce strong influences on SNS use, both increasing and decreasing directions. However, favorite or admired persons and in-trend feelings have small impact on how people use SNSs. Perhaps, SNSs are public space opened to selective audience and then allow users to be influenced by someone of their choice. Different from other media, SNSs provide public, selective space where those who are perceived as close ones are more powerful than others.

Political, social, and economic situations. What occurred in society politically, socially, and economically influenced participants on SNS use in different ways. Political situations had strong impact on the participants with age 30 and above, whereas social situations affected less on SNS use

for all age groups. On the other hand, economic situations tended to have the least influence on SNS behavior. Only one participant who was a business owner told that economic situations affected her use a little "to follow the Minister of Finance page." Those who were not influenced by economic gave the reasons that they "get the information about this from other media" and "check the certain information on the related websites directly."

Based on the responses, the observation is that participants were influenced by political situations to increase their SNS use in two ways: (a) to obtain the fast update on certain situations and (b) to vent their feelings and opinions.

Over half of the participants in all groups, especially those who aged 30 and above, reported that they used SNS more to check updated news on political situations. Several quotes were "I use it more when we have political issues that have a lot effects on the society. I want to keep posted or know it first so I can let others know," "I want to get the update about what's going on around me so I can prepare myself for the crisis," and "I follow the news on Twitter to update the political situations, but I won't believe it right away. I use it as one source of information and check the news from other sources later." Others stated that they used SNSs more to receive all-sided information and to express their upset feelings:

Quote 1: "I'm interested in politics but I don't pay much attention to get news from the social media. Usually I use it to express my feelings, voice opinions but will get news update from other media such as TV."

Quote 2: "I use Twitter to update the political news, but use Facebook to vent my feelings. If it's something upset me, I'll post the comment for that.

So I use Facebook and Twitter for different purposes.”

Quote 3: “I used it more, especially during the violent crises, to get news from both sides. After that I didn’t use it much.”

Quote 4: “Sometimes I use it to check information from the side I don’t like, but I don’t pay attention to it much.”

Those who were affected less by the political situations gave the reason that they preferred to watch television as a major source of news. For example, “The political situations don’t affect me to use SNSs more because I get updated news mostly from TV.”

In terms of social situations such as online crime and social activities, participants were less influenced by them. Most participants in the youngest group indicated that these social issues did not affect their SNS use at all due to a concern for source credibility. Several students said that “It doesn’t affect my use at all because I don’t pay attention to these things and don’t use Facebook to follow up this. I’m not sure if it’s true,” “No, not related to my use. I get the update about this from TV because the information should be screened already,” and “General situations won’t affect my use because I think anyone can write anything on Facebook. I’ll follow up from other credible media, but again the media can’t give me all-sided information. So I use SNSs to get well-rounded information for a better analysis.”

When asked whether the possible crime from the posted information on SNSs affected their use, most participants showed that they were aware of the privacy and careful of their posted personal

information. For examples, “I heard about the online crime from news report, but it won’t affect me to use less because I post only proper information. I won’t put personal information there to minimize the risks,” “I’m so careful and change password all the time,” “No, not affect my use. I set security lock and add only someone I already know. I won’t put my personal information there.”

Another participant accepted that the social situations and crime influenced her use a little, “For social situations, it depends if they’re my interest. For crime, it makes me use it less sometimes when someone seems to cross the line. Privacy is very important. Facebook users are variety, including someone I don’t want them to know something.” Also, few participants said the social activities affected them to use SNSs more when they were interested in those issues such as to click ‘Like’ on the page about forest planting project and the comments on the car accident.

Additional Influences on SNS Use

The last question in the focus group interview asked participants “Are there anything else that we have not talked about, but influence you to use SNSs more or less?” The factors emerged from the responses were classified into three categories: (a) privacy concern, (b) new applications, and (c) image at workplace.

Several participants expressed that the concern for privacy may reduce their SNS use, for examples, “if my privacy is violated such as my bad pictures are posted, I may use it less,” “I’ll use less if it creates personal problems. Some posted my pictures that I don’t want others to see,” “I’ll use them less if people post bad messages, for example, they threw violent words at each other.”

Others accepted that new applications such as games and convenient access encouraged them to use SNSs more. Some of the responses were "I use them more to play games with friends everyday. It makes us get closer, know each other more, and develop better relationships," and "If there're new games, applications, or chat functions that are better or more convenient, I'll use them more."

Lastly, some participants showed concern about their image perceived by others at workplace. For example, a private-sector employee said "Sometimes I use it less because I don't want my boss see that I'm on it all the time." A business owner stated that "I use less during working hours to set a good example for my team."

Discussion

The qualitative approach explores several factors that serve as external influences on how people use SNSs. These factors are (a) media channels, (b) significant others, and (c) political situations.

Media Channels

The contents on television, radio, printing, and out-of-home channels tend to emphasize promotional information and elaboration on certain issues posted on the SNSs. However, the media contents influence people to use SNSs differently, depending on the nature of each medium. Television is widely reached by general people, and then produces more impact on SNS behavior. On the other hand, radio and printing media are segmented by audiences' characteristics and become less observed by mass audience.

Possibly, people are less influenced by radio and printing contents on their SNS use because

these may not be their media choices. The finding is consistent with the Uses and Gratification's premise. People are selective media users to fulfill their needs, and they are more influential than media (Rubin, 2002). When a new communication technology is invented and adopted, people have asked the same question of "What is this new medium doing to us?" The answer lies in that it has impact on people's behavior, but its influence is also limited by people's choices.

Significant Others

Significant others appear to be the strongest factor that influences SNS behavior. The results support the theory of reasoned action. People are influenced by others' perceptions of their behavior. This study shows that people use or not to use SNSs based on the opinions of their loved ones, family members, and friends. Although SNSs are new media adopted rapidly, their influences are greater through the basic forms of communication – interpersonal ties and talks. The two-step flow of information theory suggests that interpersonal influence is stronger than media influence (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Consistently, SNSs need an opinion leader to produce great impact on people. Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels (2009) found that word-of-mouth referrals were more influential than traditional communication strategies to acquire new users on the major social networking site.

Political Situations

During the past several years, the political situations in Thailand have been vulnerable due to power split. People are attentive to news update on political situations and activities, especially through SNSs, which are perceived as fast and convenient

media. Although people are influenced by political situations surrounding them, they tend to use SNSs for interactive purposes – to vent their upset feelings, to voice their opinions, and to check others' views. They use SNS as a fast channel to obtain updated information, but television remains the major source of news. The new media channel reflects the change in media behavior among people in the way that people demand interaction and involvement in constructing and receiving the media contents. This demand may not be fulfilled when using the mainstream media and calls for changes.

Age Differences

This study raises another inference related to age differences. First, participants had different experience in terms of how long they had used SNSs. The younger they were, the longer years they had used social networking sites. The notion to this finding could be explained with the concept of diffusion of innovation suggesting that people adopt innovations at different pace along the adoption process (Rogers, 1983). Consumers at older age are less likely to try new technologies and adopt most of innovations (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). Gilly and Zeithaml (1985) indicated that elderly group tried and adopted scanner-equipped grocery stores and automated teller machines (ATMs) less than the nonelderly group. Hence, people with older age may spend time longer to adopt the innovation such as SNSs and then have less years of using experience.

Moreover, age seems to mediate media influences on SNS behavior. For the participants with age 30 and over, what media presented about SNSs did not affect much on their use (see Table 1). The explanation is that people at older age

appears to be more purposive. When they use SNSs, they have a specific goal to access information of their interest. Media role as a gatekeeper may be limited for this group of participants. This notion needs further investigation.

SNS Influences on Professional Image

Another interesting implication is the effect of SNS use on professional image. Some participants accepted that they minimized the access to SNSs because they wanted to remain positive professional image perceived by co-workers. This finding also shows a strong support for the theory of reasoned action. People are influenced by their own and others' attitudes about the SNS behavior. Because SNSs serve as personal and public media simultaneously, they blur the line between privacy and mass. With this nature, the users can maximize the benefit for professional purposes. Employers begin to use SNSs for background and personality checks on job applicants without their awareness and make hiring decisions based on the information posted on the SNSs (Clark & Roberts, 2010). The next questions to be explored include "is it ethical to use SNS information for hiring purpose?" and "how do people practice the SNS use with social responsibility?"

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations are addressed. First, with the focus group interviews, the findings of this study may not provide an explanation of media and social influences on SNS behavior in all groups. The multi-method studies are crucial to gain in-depth and extended results of general users. Second, political environment emerged as a certain factor influencing SNS use, but this factor may not be applied to a

normal political situation in Thailand. The political crises in the past five years stimulate Thais to be more attentive to political news and consume information from various media. However, when

the crises are minimized, the investigation on political influences on SNS behavior is needed to broaden the results across situations.

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