

How Social Networking Affects the Relationships between Friends

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine the influence of Social Network Sites (SNS) in Thailand, by investigating specifically how SNS affects the relationships between friends. This study will employ a quantitative research by survey method using a questionnaire as an instrument.

A sample of 400 participants will be recruited using multistage sampling from 76 provinces in Thailand. The researcher will use simple random sampling to draw 10 provinces and use convenience sampling to find individual subjects from the provinces selected.

The instrument is composed of 4 parts; namely the demographic section, the frequency of their SNS uses, the purpose of their SNS use, and their relationship with friends. The questionnaire will be checked for content validity and reliability before collecting data. The data obtained will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviation), and inferential tests (regression analysis).

Keywords: Social Network Sites (SNS), Relationship, Relational Communication Theory (RCT), Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

1. Introduction

At present, communication technology is rapidly developing; in particular, the internet has become an effective means for enhancing communication between individuals. So far, the number of internet users has continuously increased. According to the Internet World States survey, in 2011 there are 2 billion internet users which is 32.7% of all people over the world. The internet has become a convenient channel for communication. Researchers have begun to discuss the effects of the Internet on social relationships (Gennaro and Dutton, 2007). Through the Internet, Social Network Sites (SNS) have developed, creating online communities through communication channels such as hi5, Facebook, MySpace and many other sites. The result is that online social networks have rapidly become very popular as they allow members to exchange information and converse about their common interests. The development of SNS has affected interpersonal communication and changed the way people communicate. Instead of communicating face-to-face, we communicate through the online network. Although, some people might prefer

face-to-face communication for maintaining relationships, others prefer SNS when communicating with friends, family members, or even strangers. (Schiffrin, Eldelman, Falkenster and Stewart, 2010).

The internet users in Asia tend to be continuously increased (Internet World States, 2011). In Thailand, Internet use has continuously spread out. As of 2010, there were 20 million Internet users in Thailand, Internet use has focused not only on the development of social network communities as entertainment sites, but as marketing tools that have become very popular among teenagers, businessmen, and even politicians. People have turned more attention to online communities and networks for a variety of reasons.

That is why the author likes to study the influence of SNS in Thailand. SNS is composed of many functions, including private messaging, sharing of videos or photos, blogging and instant messaging. SNS is very convenient and saves time. SNS enables the creation of communities in the cyber world and, as a result, has become popular. Additionally, SNS can affect ongoing relationships, especially among friends who desire real-time communication updates. The purpose of this research is to investigate how SNS affects on the relationships between friends.

2. Review of Literature

Relational Communication Theory

This study applies Relational Communication Theory (RCT) as a theoretical framework because this theory addresses the nature of relational communication. Communication and relationships are highly related to each other. However, the development of a friendship depends not only on communication but on individual culture and context. Relational Communication Theory focuses on patterns, forms, processes, content, message exchanges, and interactions that further relational meaning. Social members communicate to maintain, modify, and even end their relationship depending on context, situation and relationship dynamics. This framework was developed from the concept of systems theory and cybernetics (Rogers, 2008).

Today, communication technology has rapidly developed so that the internet has become a vital medium for sharing, searching, and exchanging information as well as for entertainment. Technology has always played an important role in changing human relationships (Chesboro, 2000). With the advancement of technology, the internet has become an alternative channel for initiating, building, maintaining, and even disengaging from relationships. SNS provides many functions, such as chat rooms, message boards, and files and photo uploading and downloading. SNS can be very convenient, with no limitations on time and space. Given the explosion of online communities, it has become increasingly important to study the effects of SNS and to explore how SNS has influenced relationships between friends.

Social Network Site (SNS)

As the Internet has extended its functions and developed online social networks, it has become a popular communication channel especially among teenagers. Adolescents use SNS for various reasons. Some disclose personal information including their identities and preferences through their online profile (Livingstone, 2008). Ito, Baumer, Bittanti, Boyd, Cody, and Herr-Stephenson (2009) proposed that youth use technologies like SNS to connect with friends, romantic partners, and broader groups of peers.

SNS is, essentially, a website where individuals can create their own personal information and present that information to the public or limit the information to a semi-public (online) area of this networking system. Users can connect with others as they share their information, or visit other peoples' sites and block their personal site from others in the network. As is suggested by this overview, SNS provides broad possibilities for information sharing and connection (Boyd and Ellison, 2007)

Social Network Sites, then, constitute software development on the Internet in response to the lifestyle of people who are, increasingly, spending more time in front of the computer and surfing the Internet. Gradually, Social Network Sites have become the places to publicize personal information and to share articles, photos, comments, interests and activities. SNS provides opportunities for all users to share a huge source of information. At present, there are many SNS, such as MySpace, Google, and Facebook.

A Comparison of Face-to-face Communication (FtF) and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Many researchers have paid attention to the development of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and have raised significant questions about this form of communication. There have been many discussions about the pros and cons of CMC. In the negative way, some peoples believe that CMC causes isolation and loneliness, and that face-to-face communication maintains healthier relationships while Internet use takes time away from socializing with family and friends (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, and Scherlis, 1998). Nie (2001) argued that time spent on the internet replaces time spent on socializing, particularly with family and doing interactive activities. Compared with face-to-face communication, CMC is limited in that it can be difficult to recognize and share points of view, and it is hard to develop positive personal relationships (Kiesler and Sproull, 1992).

In contrast, some studies have shown that CMC has the ability to create better communication. According to Gennaro and Dutton (2007), the Internet is a channel for making new friends. Tang (2010) argued that Internet spreads out and increases acquaintances and

friends through online communities. CMC also encourages face-to-face communication after people have engaged in CMC (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002).

There is still a big controversy over the effects of online relationships. Researchers are continuing to debate this issue. Bargh and McKenna (2004) found that the Internet had a positive effect with respect to building and maintaining strong and satisfying social relationships. Moreover, the Internet provides for the development of high-quality friendships and can have an impact on personal well-being (Liu and Larose, 2008).

Other researchers have argued that relationships based only on online communication are impersonal and shallow, and that limiting relational communication to the online environment is detrimental to the relationship (Kraut et al. 1998; Moody, 2001). Thayer and Ray (2006) found that age influenced online communication with friends and unknown individuals because young adults had higher preferences for online communication with friends and unknown individuals than the middle and late adult age groups. Basically, the more people use CMC for relationships, the more they prefer it. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (2002) compared offline and online relationships and found that the quality of offline relationships was better than that of online relationships. Chan and Cheng (2004) compared offline and online friendship in terms of the quality at different stages of relationship development and found that offline friendships involved more interdependence, breadth, depth, code changes, understanding, commitment, and network convergence than online friendships. Donath (2008) mentioned that SNS use might allow a weak relationship to be maintained at a higher level of trust. Many SNS studies have focused on relationship maintenance rather than on building new relationships (Choi, 2006; Baym and Ledbetter, 2009). With communication come relationships. It is interesting to explore how new technologies bring about new patterns of communication, and how the new patterns affect their users, especially with respect to their personal relationships.

Relationship and Friends

Relationships are related to communication because communication encourages the development of relationships. Over the course of time and with additional communication, the closeness of the relationship can increase or decline (Fisher, 1987). Parks and Floyd (1996) identified seven dimensions of interpersonal relationships—interdependence, breadth, depth, code changes, understanding, commitment, and network convergence. Knapp (1984) identified five stages of relationship development, namely, initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bounding, whereas Altman and Taylor (1973) divided the stages of relationship development as orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange and stable exchange.

People create a relationship by communicating with others and using messages and dialogue as tools to connect them. Those messages and dialogue convey the content and meaning that express the relations between and among member. Present day technology provides advanced communication innovations through the Internet and SNS as alternative channels of communication. The development of technology has also changed the patterns and contexts of communication. In the process, we are developing new ways to relate with each other. New technologies encourage the development of human relationships. On the other hand, those new technologies affect conventional, face-to-face conversation and can lessen the tight relationship due to the ability to access the site and to use the technology.

The development of technology has created SNS that are very popular. SNS have become a new vehicle for communication. Researchers need to examine how the use of SNS affects relationships between friends. The research questions to be examined are: 1.) Does the different demography and friendship type have any affect to the usage of social network to communicate between friends? and 2.) How does the social network sites (SNS) affect to the friendship?

There are two hypotheses as follows:

H1: The gender, age, income, education, and type of friends are significantly related to the SNS usage.

H2: The level of SNS usage is significantly related to the relationship between friends.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of SNS on personal relationships between friends. This study will employ a quantitative research by survey method using a questionnaire as an instrument.

Sampling plan

A population consists of Thais aging between 18-49 years old, which is the interesting age group to study as they frequently use the internet. According to the table of the sample sizes for various populations of size 10 to 500 million, 384 samples are adequate (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p.242). Therefore, the researcher used 400 participants.

A sample of 400 participants will be recruited using multistage sampling from 76 provinces from 6 regions in Thailand. The stratified random sample will be classified as of the following areas: 9 provinces in the North, 20 provinces in the Northeast, 21 provinces in the Central region, 7 provinces in the East, 5 provinces in the West, and 14 provinces in the South. A quota of 10% will be established for each area so the data collection from 10 provinces will be as follows: 1 North province, 2 Northeast provinces, 2 Central provinces, 1 East provinces, 1 West provinces,

and 2 South provinces. The researcher will use simple random sampling to draw provinces in each region, and use convenience sampling to find individual subjects from the provinces selected.

Instrument

The instrument is composed of 4 parts; namely the demographic section, the frequency of their SNS uses, the purpose of their SNS use, and their relationship with friends. The questionnaire will be checked for content validity and pretested with 50 samples to evaluate the reliability before collecting data.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants will be asked to complete the questionnaire, and the data obtained will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviation), and inferential tests (regression analysis).

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