

## The Use of Social Media among Thai youths for Political Communication

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### Abstract

Political communication is one of the most important processes in Thailand's political system, as well as other democratic societies, as the success of its democratic governance depends on the connection between the people and the state through their public space. Consequently, social media has the potential to enhance Thai youths' access to political information, facilitate wider-ranging political discussions, and foster political mobilization through its spaces. This research, therefore, aimed at studying the use of social media for political communication among Thai youths in today's digital society. Four hundred samples were collected through multi-stage sampling from undergraduate students studying at higher education institutions in Thailand. A questionnaire was used as a research tool for gathering data, in which the content validity of the questionnaire was examined. Cronbach's alpha was also applied in a pre-test stage to measure the reliability of the research instrument. The alpha coefficient for all items was 0.92. The results found that more than half of the responding youths demonstrated a high use of Facebook and Twitter (58.4% and 52.7%, respectively), yet a low use of YouTube for political communication (47.5%). More than 90.0% of the Thai students followed political news from news feeds on Facebook media pages and online TV programs and newspapers; where more than 80.0 percent followed political news from interesting news stations/news media outlets via Twitter. In political discussions, roughly 70.0 percent of the youths discussed political issues via Messenger, and 63.0 percent of youths exchanged ideas with like-minded and dissimilar political figures via Twitter. In terms of political mobilization, nearly 70 percent wrote/expressed their support or opposition to political activities via Facebook, followed by Twitter (67.5%) and YouTube (38.7%).

**Keywords:** *social media, political communication, youths*

### 1. Introduction

The advancement of information and communication technology, as well as the rate of use of mobile phones and social media, has revolutionized the concept of public space and raised the hopes of strengthening democracy.

Political communication is one of the most important processes in a political system, as the success of democratic governance depends on the connection between the people and the state through their public space. Political communication is also closely related to political participation. Wongchaowpreecha and Tangprasert (2019) found that political communication was positively correlated with political participation, also in line with Breindl (2010) that stated that information exposure was an important basis for promoting political participation. Participating in all forms of politics to make decisions and share opinions about political struggles is valuable in the development of a democratic society. In communication through new media, social media is an important tool for communicating political issues both in the dimension of communication from the leader or political power to the people and in the communication dimension from people to leaders or political powers. In the past, communication through traditional media opened up 'opportunities' and 'spaces' for people to communicate, albeit with several limitations. Today's social media via the Internet, however, brought about important features of interaction, thereby promoting society's political participation. Acting as a tool in converging users with different demographic and cultural characteristics, shared interests in political issues further developed the powers of communication.

Internet and social media communication have the potential to serve three politically related objectives: tracking political information; discussion of political issues (political discussion); and political mobilization (Breindl, 2010). The first objective is the follow-up of news, in which social media plays a role as an alternative medium for receiving news, demonstrating the freedom of communication with less control than mainstream media. As a result, keeping up with the news regularly helps to build the awareness of

informed citizens. In the second objective, the enhancement of political learning leads to a profound understanding of political issues. In this dimension, communication may reflect the perspective, identity, and political position of the communicator as an active citizen in society. It also stimulates and promotes united cooperation in political activities, which leads to the third objective; which is to mobilize political forces in various activities through communication between groups of people with common political interests. Here, communicators can create social capital from their interactions, encouraging integration through political activities in both the virtual and real worlds.

Thailand is classified into four regions according to the original administrative areas, namely the central region, northern region, northeastern region, and southern region (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2005); each of which is home to several leading educational institutions. Educational institutions, particularly higher education institutions, have been a crucible for decades of youths' attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors; which continue to introduce new graduates into society. These settings are not only responsible for transferring knowledge and new ideas, but also promote political socialization, so that young individuals are ready to perform civic duties and participate in a democratic society. Learning outcomes, resulting from the accumulation of knowledge in civic roles through study and extracurricular activities, including cultivating various roles within the family unit and is reflected in the behavior and participation in political communication. New media has opened up a 'space' for youths to participate in political communication through various channels, especially social media; in which politics are not far away, but are a part of their lives. The research herein, therefore, aims to study undergraduate youths aged 18-22 years old, who are first-time voters from leading universities in each region to represent youths across the country.

The study of the use of social media among Thai youths for political communication is important to complete the body of knowledge in this aspect. This will further enhance the understanding of the influence of new media in promoting political communication of a new generation that will create changes within a democratic society. The results of this research are, therefore, intended to be useful in promoting and integrating social media for the benefit of political communication in different dimensions; namely tracking political news, discussing political issues, and political mobilization; with the end goal of enhancing political learning and communication among Thai youths.

## **2. Objectives**

The objective of this study was to analyze and interpret the use of social media in political communication among Thai youths; including political information, political discussion, and political mobilization.

## **3. Materials and Methods**

### **3.1 Conceptualization and Conceptual Framework**

Political communication refers to the process of creating and interpreting political messages which stimulate a response (Griffin, 2009). In this context, receivers will become passive through the process of one-way or one-dimensional communication. Receivers may play an active role in interacting with politicians, government officials, or political powers through the process of two-way or two-dimensional communication. However, such communication is not an interaction between two people, but rather an interaction between groups of people who share common interests; thereby becoming three-dimensional communication. Political communication may thus occur simultaneously (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous); such as sharing/forwarding political news or opinions, political news tracking, or the subscription of political news through various channels (Hoffman, 2012).

### **3.2 Three axes of political Internet use (Breindl, 2010)**

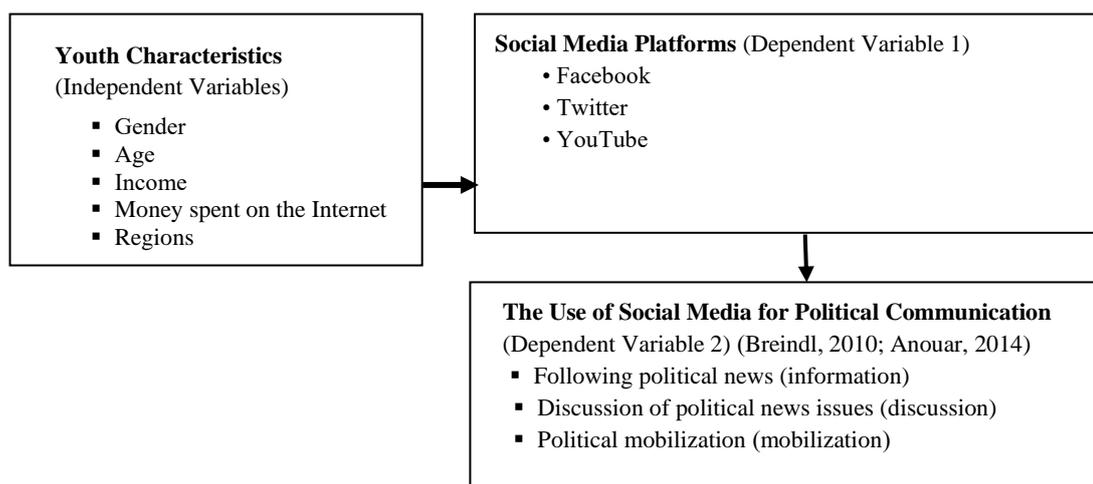
The first axis is the tracking of political information. It is an important part of the encouragement of citizens to keep up with information. As informed citizens, they represent the heart of democracy. Information is therefore an important basis that drives communication and political participation.

The second axis is discussion and debate, which is a mechanism that promotes ‘active’ citizens. This process helps to refine and nurture political ideas through political debates with other citizens or political representatives in public spaces.

The third axis involves political mobilization, which is based on the idea that citizens need to be more politically involved to build a democratic society. Citizens need to be well informed and up to date with political news to actively participate in public political spaces for the benefit of determining the direction and political policies of society.

These three axes of political Internet use may, therefore, be used as a guide to the study of political communication, as well as online political participation (Breindl, 2010; Anouar, 2014); each of which relates to the dissemination of political messages or information, which is the essence of political communication, according to Griffin (2009).

From a review of related literature, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) was developed by setting an independent variable; youth characteristics, which included gender, age, income, and allocation of money spent on the Internet. The dependent variable was the use of social media in political communication, which covered three issues: political information (or follow-up) of political news; political discussion; and political mobilization (Breindl, 2010; Anouar, 2014).



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework

### 3.3 Methods

This study applied the Quantitative Research method. The population under the study was Thai university students aged 18-22 years studying in higher education institutions throughout Thailand; totaling 3,401,148 students (Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, 2020).

The sample of this research was calculated by using the Taro Yamane (Yamane, 1973) formula with a 95% confidence level (3,401,148 students; Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, 2020). Taro Yamane’s calculations are presented as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+(e)^2}$$

n = sample size required  
 N = number of people in the population  
 e = allowable error (%)

Substitute numbers in formula:

$$n = \frac{3,401,148}{1+3,401,148 (0.05)^2} = 399.99$$

After calculating the sample size by substituting the numbers into the Yamane formula, the sample number was 399.99 persons. In order to obtain data reliability, the sample size was increased to 400 persons. The sample size was divided according to the population of four universities as follows:

**Table 1** Population of each university and sample size.

Higher education institutions in each region	Population of each university	formula	Sample size
Srinakharinwirot University	22,478	$22,478 * 400/107,489$	84
Chiang Mai University	24,773	$24,773 * 400/107,489$	92
Khon Kaen University	30,441	$30,441 * 400/107,489$	113
Prince of Songkla University	29,797	$29,797 * 400/107,489$	111
<b>Total</b>	107,489	<b>Total</b>	400

The research used Multi-Stage Sampling, the first of which was a stratified sampling, which divided Thailand into four regions (central, northern, northeastern, and southern); where youths in each area demonstrated different forms of media usage and types of political communication behavior. Purposive sampling was then performed by choosing the leading university in each region, known for its role in political socialization: Srinakharinwirot University in the central region; Khon Kaen University in the northeast; Chiang Mai University in the north; and Prince of Songkla University in the south. These leading universities attempt to nurture their graduates with educational readiness and participation in a democratic society under their civic duties. The sample size was divided according to the population. The next step, cluster sampling, obtained a representative sample of each university population by random delegation, classified by field of study and year, collected via an online questionnaire administered by a designated teacher. The questionnaires were checked for completeness, and any incomplete responses were omitted. Additional systematic sampling was then conducted to obtain a total of 400 responses, representing 100%.

The validity of the content of the questionnaire was examined by three experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). They subsequently made recommendations to improve its quality. Each question had an IOC value of 0.6-1.0. Upon improvement, the questionnaire was tested for reliability through the responses of 30 students at Khon Kaen University's Nong Khai Campus. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.92, indicating that the questionnaire was of sufficient quality for data collection.

Data collection was conducted from December 2021 to April 2022. Data analysis was performed by using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation). The collection of data was authorized by each of the universities, in which the researchers coordinated with program lecturers to send QR codes and online questionnaire links to students via e-mail.

This research was eligible for an exemption for human research ethics from the Human Research Committee of Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand on November 3, 2021, authorized under registration number HE643221.

#### 4. Results

The results of this research presented two issues: youth characteristics; and the use of social media in political communication, as follows:

##### 4.1 Thai youth characteristics

The results showed that the participants were male and female in similar proportions, 55.7 and 44.3 percent, respectively; between 18-20 years of age, with an average monthly income of 5,001-10,000 baht (40.3%), and less than 5,000 baht (34.3%). More than a third of the population spent roughly 201-400 baht per month on Internet usage. It is worth noting that over 57.0 percent spent over 400 baht per month on the Internet. More than a quarter of the population was from Khon Kaen University (Northeastern region) at 28.25% and Prince Songkla University (Southern region) at 27.75%. Less than a quarter of the sample population was from Chiang Mai University (Northern region) at 23% and Srinakharinwirot University (Bangkok/central region) at 21%.

#### 4.2 The use of social media for political communication among youths

The analysis of social media use in political communication revealed that the majority of youths used social media for political communication at moderate to high levels reaching 41.5 and 40.5 percent, respectively. More than half of the respondents used Facebook and Twitter at high levels; 58.4 and 52.7 percent, respectively. Only 47.5 percent used YouTube for political communication, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 2** Percentages of youths classified by level of social media use in political communication.

Level of social media use in political communication	Percentage
<b>1. Using social media in overall political communication (400 participants)</b>	
Low level (0-18 points)	18.0
Moderate level (19-36 points)	41.5
High level (37-54 points)	40.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>2. Using social media in political communication via Facebook (400 participants)</b>	
Low level (0-6 points)	14.8
Moderate level (7-12 points)	26.8
High level (13-18 points)	58.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>3. Using social media in political communication via Twitter (400 participants)</b>	
Low level (0-6 points)	21.5
Moderate level (7-12 points)	25.8
High level (13-18 points)	52.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>4. Using social media in political communication via YouTube (400 participants)</b>	
Low level (0-6 points)	47.5
Moderate level (7-12 points)	22.5
High level (13-18 points)	30.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The use of social media in political communication consisted of the following three aspects:

##### 1) Following political news (Information)

In terms of following political news via Facebook, it was found that about one in three youths were not friends with politicians, yet were willing to tag friends when they felt that political news would be of interest to them. Notably, more than 90 percent of youths followed political news from news feeds, media pages, and online or television programs or newspapers via Facebook. Regarding Twitter, 32.3 percent of youths never tagged their friends, followers, or political groups to share political news. Over 80 percent of youths followed political news from interesting news stations/media news outlets and shared 'likes' or gratified emojis when followers presented their favorite or consistent political issues via Twitter. It was determined that following political news via YouTube characterized youths that did not subscribe to political news channels, nor did they upload videos or share political news with friends; unlike that found in other social media venues, like Facebook (42.0%) and Twitter (38.5%).

##### 2) Discussion of political news issues (Discussion)

When considering the discussion of political issues through Facebook, it was found that youths did not discuss political issues when different opinions were expressed, in which to find a common solution. Youths did not participate in any form of discussion or comment on political issues which were not consistent with their views, accounting for 47.3 percent. A larger percentage, roughly 70 percent of youths, chatted via

Messenger when they found common interests to share with politicians/friends on Facebook. Similarly, youths did not discuss political news issues via Twitter and YouTube in the same way, at approximately 48.5 and 62.3 percent, respectively.

### **3) Political mobilization (Mobilization)**

When considering political mobilization through Facebook, it was found that youths did not mobilize political forces through Facebook in terms of cooperating in setting up public issues or political agendas, and had not been a mainstay in communicating political activities at local levels or in academia using Facebook as a tool, accounting for 55.8 percent and 50.0 percent respectively. It is worth noting that approximately 70 percent of youths wrote messages representing their support for or opposition to political activities and government policies via Facebook; which included their participation in political campaigns; such as elections, legislative nominations, or the removal of politicians. Youths, however, did not write messages supporting political activities via Twitter, nor did they participate in public issues or political agendas; in which the Twitter hashtag (#) is employed as a tool. Furthermore, they also did not make changes to their profile pictures in response to political activities. It is worth noting that more than 65 percent of youths participated in political campaigns via Twitter; such as elections, legal nominations, and/or the removal of politicians, demonstrating their willingness to write messages or statements of support for opposing government policies. In terms of political mobilization through YouTube, youths were not inclined to change their profile picture, nor did they use this form of social media to show their support or dissent of political issues or activities, at roughly 38.7 percent.

### **4.3 Differences between youth characteristics and their use of social media for political communication**

When testing the difference in the average use of social media in political communication between gender, age, monthly income, and the cost of the Internet per month; it was found that both male and female students used social media for political communication with no differences at a statistically significant level (0.05). The results also indicated that age did not affect the use of social media in political communication at a statistically significant level (0.05). While students with varied monthly incomes used social media for political communication in significantly different ways (0.05), higher-income students used social media for political communication much more so than higher than lower-income students. It was also found that students with high monthly internet expenses used more social media for political communication than those with lower monthly Internet costs (0.05).

When considering differences between regions, it was found that different regions did not affect Thai youth's use of social media in political communication at a statistically significant level (0.05). However, when classifying the region into two groups, namely the 'central' region and 'other' regions, it was found that youths studying in the central region/Bangkok used social media for political communication more than those studying at regional universities (0.05).

## **5. Discussion**

The results indicated that high-income youth's use of social media for political communication was greater than that of low-income youths, as higher incomes allowed greater access to the Internet and modern communication tools, thereby providing more opportunities to use social media for political communication. Those with higher monthly internet costs were also found to use social media for political communication more than youths with lower internet expenses, which led to an increase in the frequency and intensity of internet use, resulting in increased convenience and speed in using social media for various activities including political communication. Different incomes among Thai youths resulted in a digital divide in access to the internet and social media. While not simply a communication channel between people in today's society, social media represents an important information source for youths in a digital society (Van Aelst et al., 2017), as access to information is an important basis that encourages people to be knowledgeable and understanding of various political situations. These aspects may affect our youth's learning opportunities and news updates in various fields, including politics, and will affect their participation in political communication in the next order.

It was found that youths studying in the central region/Bangkok used social media for political communication more than those studying at regional universities. This is because the central region, particularly Bangkok, is the center of prosperity in various aspects; such as education and business. Those living in the central region were found to be better-educated, as well as having higher social and economic status, amid a higher cost of living. Youths studying at higher educational institutions in Bangkok were found to have greater learning opportunities and access to the Internet and social media than those studying in educational institutions in other regions. Consistent with the results of the study of the National Statistical Office, Bangkok has the largest number of mobile phone and Internet users, accounting for 97.2% and 91.4%, respectively; followed by the central region (95.0% and 81.2%, respectively), with 99.5 percent of youths in higher education connected to the Internet via mobile phone (National Statistical Office, 2021).

The results showed that more than half of the youths polled use Facebook and Twitter for political communication at high levels, and YouTube to a much lesser extent. We can deduce that different communication channels promote political expression in different dimensions, affecting the choices of media following their communication objectives. Facebook was found to be the most popular platform for political communication, followed by Twitter (Ahmad, Alvi, & Ittefaq, 2019). However, social media provides 'spaces', in which youths may openly express their political views and opinions. Such channels of social media, therefore, have changed the way younger individuals, particularly university students, engage in political communication and participation (Papagiannidis, & Manika, 2016). Social media can promote positive relationships between political parties and voters and encourage greater enthusiasm for political participation.

In following up on political news, the results indicated that youths tracked political news mostly through Facebook, again followed by Twitter and YouTube. Through such channels, youths are more active in political activities than in the past. Facebook's popularity may be because of its variety of entertainment content, which also stimulates interest and participation, making more conventional news channels unnecessary. For this reason, political news has become part of the youth's daily lives, through both intentional and incidental exposures (Quinlan, Gummer, Roßmann, & Wolf, 2018). Internet and social media are therefore becoming increasingly important channels for disseminating political news and information (McAllister, 2015; Ahmad et al., 2019).

It was further noted that the majority of young people followed social media news feeds or timelines, followed by media pages. In doing so, audiences stay up to date with news and events happening in society, making news sharing with friends on social networks more important and persuasive for individuals. It reflects the control of users (senders and receivers) who have the power of communication via social media. The various platforms' algorithms combine news with entertainment and user-generated content delivered through social media newsfeeds/timelines (Hogan, & Quan-Haase, 2010; Bergstrom, & Belfrage, 2018). Despite these trends, traditional media is considered a more reliable source of news than social media, and, therefore, may aid in the prevention of 'fake' news, as the audience can simultaneously check the news presented from various sources (Swart, 2021).

In political discussions, Facebook Messenger was found to be the main method used to express common political interests among friends and/or politicians. They also exchanged ideas with both like-minded and different-minded individuals via Twitter, though to a lesser amount. It can be explained that the internet and social media have provided spaces and opportunities for youths to discuss political issues. Political interest, therefore, develops and grows through political interaction and communication (Jiang, 2016). Facebook plays an important role as a platform for political discussion and has become a popular political communication channel among Thai youths. Social media not only stimulates interest in politics but also changes the way individuals communicate and participate in political news/activities. Thus, the older ways of communication and political participation have been replaced by new ones, which act as important driving tools. This allows youths to express, communicate, and participate in political activities without space and time constraints (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Research indicated that Twitter can be used as a positive factor to promote political learning from news exposure and social interaction, as it promotes access to political news and opinions of users with common interests. Relationships and social bonds are therefore important attributes that are hidden in information sharing, in which news from credible people will be more generally accepted and be considered

more important. This is consistent with Alami, Adnan, & Kotamjani (2019) that stated that social networking sites have a positive impact on students' political learning. Political dialogue and knowledge, therefore, are more significantly accessed through social media (Park, 2017; Kesici, 2018; Intyaswati, Maryani, Sugiana, & Venus, 2021).

Facebook, again, was used predominantly for political mobilization, where youths wrote statements expressing their support or opposition to political policies and activities. Participation in political campaigns, such as elections and proposed laws was also expanded, followed by Twitter and YouTube. This explains that the one-to-many and many-to-many communications fostered mobilization through social networks; despite users being younger and less experienced in political matters. As a result, political activities through online media are thus gaining in popularity among youths. Social media represents a key factor in encouraging participation and political mobilization in ways more diverse than in the past (Holmes, & McNeal, 2018; Ahmed, 2015).

YouTube proved to be the least popular tool for political communication and mobilization, as information is generally received by users (receivers) rather than users acting as senders or creators. Communication is typically limited to comments or 'likes'/'dislikes', contrary to the concept of political mobilization. Because YouTube communicates primarily with video requiring filming and editing, content creation is much more complicated than text and images created on Facebook and Twitter. However, the development of Web 2.0 technology has encouraged youth interaction and participation in political communication through social media, replacing the traditional hierarchical 'top-to-bottom' political communication with 'horizontal' communication. As a result, social media plays an increasingly important role in political communication (Ricke, 2014; Abd Kadir, Lokman, Hamidi, & Mohamed, 2019).

## 6. Conclusion

The results showed that most youths use social media for political communication at moderate to high levels. More than half of the respondents used Facebook (58.4%) and/or Twitter (52.70%); whereas YouTube garnered only 47.50 percent. In terms of political news tracking, more than 90 percent of youths followed political news from news feeds, media pages, and television and newspaper venues via Facebook. In discussing political issues, roughly 70 percent of youths chatted via Messenger when sharing common interests, whereas 63 percent exchanged ideas with like-minded and/or dissimilar political figures via Twitter. In terms of political mobilization, about 70 percent of youths expressed their support or opposition to political activities via Facebook, followed by Twitter (67.50%) and YouTube (38.70%). When testing the differences between youth characteristics and their use of social media for political communication, it was found that students with varied monthly incomes used social media for political communication in significantly different ways (0.05), higher-income students used social media for political communication much more so than higher than lower-income students. It was also found that students with high monthly Internet expenses used more social media for political communication than those with lower monthly Internet costs (0.05). When considering differences between regions, it was found that different regions did not affect Thai youth's use of social media in political communication at a statistically significant level (0.05). However, when classifying the region into two groups, namely the 'central' region and 'other' regions, it was found that youths studying in the central region/Bangkok used social media for political communication more than those studying at regional universities (0.05).

The findings indicated that the respondents used Facebook and Twitter at high levels for political communication, tracking political news, discussing political issues, and political mobilization. This reflects the limitations of the use of YouTube in political communication. However, the video and animated content on YouTube more easily reinforces political learning than the text and images on Facebook and Twitter's text-based platforms. YouTube's features are considered more interesting and compelling. Therefore, political communication through YouTube, especially in terms of following political news to enhance political knowledge, should be promoted. This is an important part of the development of well-informed citizens. Additionally, it was found that the exchange of political views with politicians and others through Messenger and Twitter resulted in greater shared political learning among youths. This will consequently help stimulate and encourage political participation in the next order. The research intends to provide helpful information to educational and media institutions, political parties, and related agencies; such as the

Parliament, the Election Commission, and King Prajadhipok's Institute in their communication with youths through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to encourage them to become informed through social media and to support political learning. In this way, Thai youths will be increasingly included in the political process and make their participation more meaningful.

As participation in political communication is one of the duties of citizens in a democratic society, youths in other regions should be encouraged to increase the use of social media to enhance learning opportunities and political communication through such channels. Educational institutions and government play an important role in promoting the use of social media for political communication through learning activities in related subjects and improve infrastructure to help ensure equitable access for regional youths to narrow the gaps and disparities in the use of social media political communication between youths in central region/Bangkok and other regions.

Recommendations for future research are as such: various media types may be studied further to gain insights into how youths use such media to promote political communication in different dimensions; and a study of target groups eligible as first-time voters in state universities, like Rajabhat University and Rajamangala University of Technology; as well as autonomous universities, private universities, and community colleges that focus on non-graduates to examine their role in political communication and participation following the roles and duties of citizens in a democratic society.

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