

Online Identities Creations of Thai Celebrities via Instagram: Why and How

Pan Nilphan Chatchaiyan

Abstract

Celebrities use of social media to project their public/private lives is a current rising trend. Online identities creation is a new media culture for self-presentation. This research studied the creation of online identities by Thai celebrities via a social networking application, Instagram. The purposes of the research are (1) to study the reasons for online identities creations via Instagram of Thai celebrities, and (2) to study the types and methods of online identities creations via Instagram of Thai celebrities. This qualitative research focused on the group of celebrities who are actors/actresses, singers, and MCs in Thailand. Nine celebrities who are active Instagram users with a minimum of 70,000 followers were selected. Data was collected from May 2014 - January 2015, using in-depth interviews and content analysis of celebrities' Instagram pictures. The research found that the two main reasons for online identities creations by celebrities are (1) the psychological reasons, and (2) the technological reasons. Celebrities exhibit patterns of behaviour that reveal a *need to belong* and a *need for self-presentation*, and the popularity of Instagram influences the uses of this social technology in their everyday lives. The type of online identities creation by celebrities is a selective self-presentation in positive way. Methods of online identities creation by celebrities are (1) online identities creation via self-presentation, (2) online identities creation via social relationships presentation, and (3) online identities creation via cultural consumption. The research contributed new knowledge in the area of online identities creation by Thai celebrities, where no other studies have been done previously. The research combines perspectives from new media and communication studies and social sciences studies. The literature reviewed involves studies of online identities creation, media and celebrities, and online communication via social networking applications.

Key Words: Online Identities Creation, Social Media, Celebrity, Instagram, Thailand.

1. Introduction

Celebrities have special stature in society because of their power to influence the perceptions of the public. The term *presentational media* is described as the new media culture that involves the promotion and presentation of the self via social media. The personal lives of celebrities receive as much attention from the

public as their work in the media. Social media enables celebrities to share their personal lives and create a public self beyond traditional media.¹

Manuel Castells's notion of *mass self-communication* clarifies a phenomenon of new interactive communication that enables the self-presentation of individuals.² Anyone with access to social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can create their 'public or semi-public profile,' and give out their information.³ By using pictures or messages that represent who they are, individuals can communicate and create social relationships with others. However, individuals have to contend with the 'blurred boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public, and virtual and real' of social media. They also have to have certain skills to manage 'multi-layered audiences' within social networks.⁴

The term identity is related to the concept of the self. Identity is a feeling about oneself that can be separated in two parts. The first part involves the feeling that we have about ourselves. It is the answer to the questions of *who am I* or *who I think I am*. The second part is the feeling that we have about how others perceive us. Thus, identity is a 'social product,' because the development of self-image depends on the circumstances in which we find ourselves.⁵ In everyday situations, individuals will act according to the expectations of others. Just like an actor on stage, an individual has both 'front stage and back stage behaviour' when interacting with others. People will try to present themselves in a good light in order to gain acceptance from others.⁶

In the past, studies about online identities was focused on the *anonymous* environment and found new identity creations that are not necessarily related to the real selves. Online space was therefore a social laboratory in which people could try out various identities.⁷ Later research studies changed the focus to *nonymous* environments, such as internet dating sites and Facebook.⁸ Instead of new identities creations, these later researches found more self-disclosure behaviour.⁹ Therefore, the blurred boundaries between online and offline space is emphasised.

From a total population of 66 million people in Thailand, there are 25 million internet users and 18 million social media users. Social media users in Thailand use Facebook the most (85%), while ten per cent use Twitter and five per cent use Instagram. Instagram users in Thailand can be divided into three groups: celebrities, influencers, and normal users. Celebrities counted for 0.26 per cent of all Instagram users but had the most followers. The average followers per one celebrity are 172,013.¹⁰

This research focuses on the use of Instagram among Thai celebrities. The purpose of the research is to discover, first, why Thai celebrities create online identities via Instagram and, second, how their online identities are created.

2. Method

The study employed the qualitative research approach. The study focuses on the creations of online identities by Thai celebrities. The research participants were nine celebrities (three males, six females) who are actors/actresses, singers, or MCs in Thailand. Their ages were between 22-41 years old (mean 32.5).

Accessing to the celebrities was one of the first challenges in doing this research topic. The researcher needed to have connections through people working in Thai media. The research participants were selected by using a purposive sampling technique. Only celebrities who agreed to be interviewed were selected. In addition, the celebrities must be active Instagram users with a minimum of 70,000 followers. The celebrities' Instagram accounts must also be open to public access.

Methods of data collection combined in-depth interviews and content analyses of the celebrities' Instagram accounts. The informal and non-structured interviews with nine celebrities were conducted from 12 May 2014 to 17 January 2015 in Bangkok, Thailand. The average time spent on the interviews was 22 minutes.

The content analyses of the nine celebrities' Instagram accounts were also conducted for one month from 10 January to 10 February 2015. A total of 858 pictures and twenty seven video clips were analysed. Data collected were profile descriptions, pictures, and video clips posted on the celebrities' Instagram accounts. The table of data recorded includes (1) the frequency of different types of pictures and video clips, (2) the frequency of types of photo comments written by celebrities, and (3) the celebrities' profile description messages.

The research applied methodological triangulation that examined the data collected through different research methods, which are interviews, content analysis, and literature review.

3. Results

Online identities creation among Thai celebrities is a process in which celebrities portray their public selves. Thai celebrities present themselves online by uploading pictures and video clips, and by making comments on their photos or video. The research results reveal the answers to why and how the online identities of Thai celebrities are created via Instagram as follows:

A. Reasons for Online Identities Creation via Instagram by Thai Celebrities.

The main reasons for online identities creation by Thai celebrities are the *psychological reasons*, which combine a *need to belong* and a *need for self-presentation*. The supportive reasons for online identities creation by Thai celebrities are the *technological reasons*, which combine the technological affordance and the popularity of social technology.

The first *psychological reason* motivating celebrities to create online identities via Instagram is a *need to belong*. The *need to belong* is explained as the 'intrinsic drive to affiliate with others and gain social acceptance,' which is similar to self-

worth and self-esteem.¹¹ Thai celebrities portray patterns of behaviour that reveal a need to belong as follows:

The first behaviour is the concern of celebrities for how many *likes* they received for each pictures. When posting pictures or video on Instagram, followers can click on *like* button to give positive feedback. On social media, social acceptability can be measured by the *likes* received from others.¹²

In the interview data, every celebrity reported that they checked the number of *likes* received after each photo or video clip was posted. The celebrities feel great when receiving a lot of *likes*. However, if their photos received fewer *likes*, it would cause some concern and the celebrities would think about the reasons why those particular pictures received fewer *likes*. This pattern of behaviour surprisingly shows that although they are famous and have a lot of followers, the celebrities reveal their need to belong and to receive social acceptance from others.

Second, celebrities can take note of the types of pictures that would receive a large number of *likes*. For example, celebrities notice that pictures that are beautiful and sexy will receive the most *likes*. Moreover, celebrities notice that if they post their own photos, people will like them more than other picture types. This behaviour also reveals the celebrities' need to belong.

Third, the celebrities develop their own strategies to attract more *likes* on their Instagram pictures. Because the concern of celebrities is to receive a great number of likes from their followers, they will try to apply certain strategies to attract more positive feedback. For example, the celebrities would post their own photos such as head shots or body shots rather than pictures of scenery, food or pets. Another strategy discovered is that celebrities will post each picture in different time frame, instead of posting several pictures at one time. By doing this, they believe that they will receive more likes for each picture. Some celebrities try to post a variety of styles of pictures, instead of the same picture type, because they are afraid their fans or followers will become bored of their photos.

Fourth, the celebrities are concerned about their image. Being famous means that the celebrities must be careful about how they are portrayed. They will carefully select pictures and think about their fans' or the public's acceptance of their photos. The celebrities reveal that they must think before they post, rather than deleting any inappropriate pictures later, after they are posted. The celebrities want to make sure that they post pictures that will be appreciated and accepted by their fans or followers.

A *need for self-presentation* is the second *psychological reason* motivating celebrities to create online identities via Instagram. The *need for self-presentation* is explained as 'the continuous process of impression management'.¹³ It refers to the process by which celebrities try to impress others and create their online identities. The research found that this need for self-presentation exhibited by celebrities is created for three main purposes.

The first purpose of the *need for self-presentation* is *self-promotion*. Celebrities use Instagram to communicate with their fans and the general public in order to gain recognition and fame. An analysis of the data from their profile descriptions reveals that the information provided about them is similar to the information on their business cards. The information includes their real names, their managers' telephone number (so people can contact them directly for work appointments), information about their brands or products, including the products' websites and telephone numbers, and their media work such as the names of television shows and so on. All of this information helps the celebrities to promote themselves and the products that they want to sell.

The second purpose of the need for self-presentation is for *mass self-communication*.¹⁴ It is found that celebrities use Instagram as an additional tool for self-presentation, separate from traditional media. The celebrities feel that Instagram allows people to get to know their real selves more than appearing on television. Instagram is also considered to be a great tool for direct communication between them and their fans.

The third purpose is the need for self-presentation to *multi-layered audiences*. Interview data reveals that celebrities have mixed feelings about communicating with their friends and fans. The blurred boundaries of online space require celebrities to negotiate what information they would like to send out to different groups of audience members that have different relationship levels.

The *technological reasons* that influence online identities creation by Thai celebrities reflect the importance of technology in shaping our society. Technological affordance has an impact on the way celebrities use their mobile phones to easily create online identities and communicate with their fans. Moreover, the popularity of this social technology influences their everyday lives. The celebrities reveal that they use Instagram because it is popular among other Thai celebrities. This research result is in line with the technology determinism perspectives.

B. Types and Methods of Online Identities Creation via Instagram by Thai Celebrities.

The type of online identities creation by celebrities is a process of selective self-presentation in a positive way. It is found that celebrities select only good-looking photos of themselves in order to present themselves in the most positive way. They also employ mobile phone applications to edit their photos to make them more attractive before posting their photos.

Furthermore, it is found that there are three methods of online identities creation among Thai celebrities. The following will explain each method in detail. Firstly, *online identities creation via self-presentation* is found. Instagram is a tool for self-presentation by Thai celebrities. Celebrities feel that pictures on Instagram reflect their identities and their daily lives. Data from a content analysis found that

from a total of 885 pictures and video clips, celebrities upload photos of themselves the most (614 photos or 69.38%), followed by scenery pictures (201 photos or 22.71%), and pictures of friends or others the least (70 photos or 7.91%). Among photos of themselves, most photos are their single shot photos (300 photos or 48.86%), followed by photos of them with friends (283 photos or 46.09%).

Most photos have photo comments to describe the situations or what they are feeling at the time (872 photos from a total of 885 or 98.53%). When analysing the photos comments it is found that most of the comments are generally worded to describe what is happening in the photo or expressing general feeling such as love, loneliness, or hunger, etc. This serves to emphasise the superficial level of communication via social media found in another previous study.¹⁵

Online identities creation via social relationships presentation is another method celebrities used to present their social relationships. From a total of 885 pictures and video clips analysed, there are 417 pictures that used the social relationships presentation method (47.12%). This is most frequently seen in pictures of celebrities with their friends (283 times). The pictures of their friends alone are found only 59 times.

In addition, celebrities use *hashtag* as a way to state social relationships with others. *Hashtag* is a type of label that is created by putting the hash character # before a relevant keyword, similar to the use of the @ character before name of another Instagram's users account, in order to link to the specific content or user's account within Instagram. It is found that there are 265 pictures using *hashtag* to show social relationships with others.

Online identities creation via cultural consumption is also found among Thai celebrities. The celebrities present their 'cultural self,' which is defined as self-presentation via cultural preferences or cultural tastes, such as interests, activities, quotes, movies and music.¹⁶ A content analysis found that there are 187 pictures and video clips from a total of 885 that belong to the category of the celebrity's cultural self (21.2%). Scenery pictures are found most often (68 times). Personal belongings such as bags and clothes are found 41 times. Food, quotes and pets are found 35, 33 and 16 times respectively.

Brand endorsement is another way to create online identities via cultural consumption. There are 316 pictures and video clips from a total of 885 that belong to the celebrity endorsement category (35.17%). Brand mentions in photo comments by using *hashtag* to support particular brands are found the most (303 times). Full product descriptions in photo comments are found 98 times. Pictures of products and pictures of celebrities holding products are found the least (35 times). The variety of methods used in one picture can be mixed. For example, celebrities may use product photos with brand mentions with *hashtag* together in one picture.

The way that celebrities endorse products with *hashtag* most reveals that they prefer implicit rather than explicit ways to sell products. Interview data also

supports this argument, because celebrities admit that they have to select brands that are not in conflict with their identities. Celebrities think that Instagram is directly linked with their identities, therefore they want the products that they are associated with to relate to and match with their lifestyles. Some celebrities admit that they get paid to endorse certain brands. Those who said they do not get paid for product endorsements maintain that they do it as a personal favour to their friends.

4. Discussion

Social media users are viewed as being their own paparazzi.¹⁷ Celebrities are not different. Personal photos are shared to the public as part of the celebrities' online identities creation and self-promotion. The current study demonstrates that psychological reasons and technological reasons influence the use of Instagram among Thai celebrities in creating their online identities.

The psychological motivations for online identities creation by Thai celebrities via Instagram are no different from those found in the studies of the reasons for Facebook use by individuals.¹⁸ Celebrities are no different when using social media for social interactions. We have already discussed the *need to belong* and the *need for self-presentation* on the part of celebrities when using Instagram. This is in accordance with what Erving Goffman stated about social interaction in people's everyday lives. Individuals will observe and act upon the expectations of others.¹⁹

However, celebrities are different, because they have more followers than general users. One celebrity mentioned in an interview that she cannot turn on her mobile phone's notification feature, otherwise her mobile might explode due to her many followers posting *likes* and comments on her photos.

In addition, the celebrities are found to present their 'ideal self' identities online and post information about themselves strategically in order to gain acceptance from others. This result is similar to the finding of a study on identity construction on Facebook, which found that a socially desirable type of identity is most often found.²⁰ Thus, self-presentation online reflects or even magnifies the interactions of people in real life.²¹ The selective self-presentation of Thai celebrities online is in accordance with Walther's hyperpersonal model.²² The result of this study also supports the advantages model of online communication over other channels since the celebrities feel that it helps their fans or followers to get to know their real selves better.

In creating online identities, Thai celebrities not only present themselves visually with photos or video clips of themselves, they also implicitly create online identities via social relationship presentation and cultural consumption. The nature of social media in creating connections among people within the same networks reflects how the celebrities create online identities by showing social relationships with others in their photos. In the same way, the nature of cultural consumption

culture also reflects how celebrities present themselves with their cultural preferences around them.

5. Conclusion

This research has answered two main questions: why and how Thai celebrities create online identities via Instagram. Thai celebrities engage in online identities creation because of psychological reasons and technological reasons. The celebrities selectively present themselves in positive way through the means of online identities via self-presentation, social relationships presentation, and cultural consumption.

The research combined perspectives from new media and communication studies and social sciences studies. The focus of the research was on online identities creation by Thai celebrities and the findings offers insights on this area of study in Thailand where no other studies have been done. It is hoped that this study broadens and deepens the knowledge in this area and benefits similar studies in other countries.

Notes

¹ David P. Marshall, 'The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media,' *Celebrity Studies* 1(2010): 35-38.

² Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1542-1550.

³ Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2008): 211-213.

⁴ Nancy, K. Baym and Danah Boyd, 'Socially Mediated Publicness: An Introduction,' *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56 (2012): 320.

⁵ David L. Altheide, 'Identity and the Definition of the Situation in a Mass-Mediated Context,' *Symbolic Interaction* 23.1 (2000): 2-3.

⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Peraguin, 1959).

⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (London: Phoenix, 1995).

⁸ Monica T. Whitty, 'Revealing the 'Real' Me, Searching for the 'Actual' You: Presentations of Self on An Internet Dating Site,' *Computers in Human Behavior* 24 (2008): 1707; Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck and Jason Martin, 'Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships,' *Computers in Human Behavior* 24 (2008): 1816.

⁹ Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000).

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- ¹¹ Ashwini Nadkarni and Stefan G. Hofmann, 'Why Do People Use Facebook?,' *Personality and Individual Differences* 52 (2012): 245.
- ¹² Nadkarni, 'Why Do People', 245
- ¹³ Ibid, 246-247
- ¹⁴ Castells, *Communication Power*, 1542-1550.
- ¹⁵ Candice R. Hollenbeck and Andrew M. Kaikati, 'Consumer' Use of Brands to Reflect their Actual and Ideal Selves on Facebook,' *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 29 (2012): 395-405.
- ¹⁶ Zhao, 'Identity Construction', 1825-1826
- ¹⁷ Angela M. Cirucci, 'First Person Paparazzi: Why Social Media Should Be Studied More Like Video Games,' *Telematic and Informatic* 30 (2013): 47-59.
- ¹⁸ Nadkarni, 'Why Do People'.
- ¹⁹ Goffman, *The Presentation of*.
- ²⁰ Zhao, 'Identity Construction', 1825-1826
- ²¹ Cirucci, 'First Person Paparazzi', 56
- ²² Joseph B. Walther, 'Selective Self-Presentation in Computer-Mediated Communication: Hyperpersonal Dimensions of Technology, Language, and Cognition.' *Computers in Human Behavior* 23.1 (2007): 2538-2557.

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Author's Bio Pan Nilphan Chatchaiyan is a Lecturer at Faculty of Mass Communication, Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand. E-mail: pan1000@gmail.com